THE BACKBENCHERS

3 Days of Summer

SIDHARTH OBEROI

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VISIT…

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“I would never understand photography, the sneaky, murderous taxidermy of it.”

– Lorrie Moore, Anagrams

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Foreword

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I believe it's essential for me to talk about the people in the book before I start writing this one. For those who are familiar with the world of Natasha, Yuvraj, Ananya and Shreya (. . . and Rana, Rishabh . . . The list goes on) I want to extend my gratitude for spending your time with these people, for they have grown to become my closest friends in the past few years.

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Natasha is doing well now, after the whole episode of her being ousted from the head girl post (she did admit to having reapplied for the position more than once, but she's moved on now.) Ananya and Yuvraj happen to be going strong too—Yuvraj says he needs to work on his chances at staying in Delhi more than his parents' wishes of sending him abroad. But he has decided not to tell Ananya about it, lest it freaks her out.

Ananya has finally realized that her creative self needs a revamp, and she seems ready to embrace herself for what she is deep inside—a simple human being who likes being happy. When I spoke with her the last time, she said she was unsure of where her relationship was going. But I assure you, that's just *classic* Ananya, always undermining everything good that's happening in her life. Truth is, I've hardly seen couples sticking it out so strong after going through the sheer amount of messiness that they have encountered. (Do I see wedding bells or hear the soft clunk of an engagement ring in the distant future? I don't know yet.)

As for Shreya—she has evolved a lot from her gradual shift from *crap* to *shit*. She thinks its okay to call her best friend a bitch sometimes, and I think

it’s going to do her a world of good. She has taken to reading now, which made me consider, on more than one occasion to ask her out. (Although I don’t really know if she would be interested) The rest of the school stays on their toes, even when they pretend that they aren’t looking up to this very special group of people. But I have seen the look in their eyes when they talk about every time Ananya and Yuvraj miss a class, or when Natasha tries to send a text to Rana.

And me—I’m just sailing on. I like the fact that my friends have agreed to share their story with me, and I get to share that story with you, dear reader. Because your love and interest has kept these people moving strong for all this time. Last I heard, they’ve got a new teacher who wants to take them on a workshop to an exotic rainforest. They seem pretty excited and I am too. Let’s hope the excitement lasts when they return from their trip. I think I’ll wait and find out.

Join me, will you?

Love,

Sidharth Oberoi

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Chapter One

The New Teacher

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Summers are a bad time for twelfth graders. Mostly because they tend to reminisce the past times when they had spent hours glaring at the television screen idly, or trying to get the better of boss levels in addictive video games. Long summers tend to get replaced slowly by the inevitable boredom of being stuck with academic books, trying to prepare for the distant dream of enrolling at a palpably decent college/university.

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Sometimes, little things like a fancy colour of lipstick on a teacher's face and an extra layer of mascara go a long way in boosting the long-lost morale of high school boys, and students always seem to be on the lookout for such opportunities to nourish their visual senses; everyone enjoys a good sight. The boys at Presidency were famous, among other things, for their ability to ogle. And the situation demanded it right now. Many of them watched her swaying movements as she made her way across the corridor and some even went as far as whistling, although she didn't seem to notice or even turn around to cast so much as a pitiful glance.

Mitali Roy wasn't too sure about why she had chosen to wear a yellow *saree* that morning. Nobody she had known in her years as a successful student had *ever* trusted the colour when it came to making important pitches. Today was an important pitch. She solaced herself with applied logic—she wasn't a student anymore and the choices that had dominated her student life shouldn't make a difference in the way her new *life* would shape up, she told herself. It had almost been three weeks since she had been appointed as the

senior wing English teacher at The Presidency Convent, and yet, many of the overgrown boys chose to not let her enjoy the *status quo* of being someone in authority.

She had, until very recently, struggled to come to terms with the fact that her career as a photojournalist wasn't taking off. Post her sudden departure from the three week intensive workshop under ace photographer Sanjib Desai, she had applied for internships almost all over the country. She had eventually discovered that the creative industry was going through a recessive phase too. There was a saturation of talent that lay behind lenses and the people who operated cameras were chosen on factors other than their sense of colour. People weren't meant to just speak with their work anymore —it had become scarily essential to present their own selves with the kind of dedication that one needed to put in his/her work of art. And her own idea of how she looked wasn't high by any standards.

She wasn't too bad with colours herself (mostly), but her ridiculously short stature (yes, the heels helped at times) didn't qualify her for the image of a *strong, independent* person as most internships listed their fundamental requirements.

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But Mitali Roy wasn't ugly. She had taken care of that, through the three agonizing years of her college life, and what she lacked in height, she more than made up for with the shade of lipstick she wore (darker shades had worked for her so far), her ten-on-ten wheatish complexion devoid of marks, and her shoulder-length, oval-cut hairdo. She may not have been visually strong but her posture reeked of confidence.

And confidence, among other things—is *sexy*.

When people spoke to her, they often found themselves struggling to understand where that confidence stemmed from. Sometimes, Mitali liked to tell herself that it was the confidence that she had adopted from her own failures and shortcomings. That source of belief in herself happened to last much longer than most of the congratulatory notes that people sent her. When she got herself a job as a senior wing teacher, a lot of veteran teachers questioned her abilities, but she had turned a deaf ear to all of those arguments. There is a difference between attempting to look good, and then actually succeeding in that attempt. More often than not, the latter brought

with itself the possibility of people passing comments.

In her past, she had lamented about not dealing with authority in the right way. Her path to success had been overdrawn and stretched, mostly, because she had been too afraid to speak up for herself when the moment demanded it. But that wasn't the case anymore.

Mitali's primary agenda of the day was to convince the dean of this strange institution to let her organize the field trip that she had planned for her class. She had more than a few strong reasons to pitch the trip across.

It was being hosted at a wildlife estate. This genre of residential arrangements had appealed to her since her college days and it was an enticing idea to spend four days away from the rotting routine of her daily life as a teacher. She enjoyed the curious glances that fell upon her perfect derriere, but such enjoyment could never overtake the gloom that she experienced living her life as a teacher. The field trip had been advertised across all her favourite photography forums and at the helm of it was her *guru*, Mr Sanjib Desai. It could very well turn out to be a good chance to socialize with Sanjib and get him to rethink about his stance of not including her in his team. Also, it was scheduled to happen at a destination that fulfilled her number-one priority for all vacation spots—what fairy tales often described as *far, far away*.

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The dean, however, was a hard man to please. The yellow *saree* didn't help. She hadn't spotted him moving his head up, even once—to look at her as she made her way through the revolving doors of his chamber and excused herself to the comfortable leather seat across his table.

'*Masinagudi*? I've never even heard of it!' the dean exclaimed when she showed him the advertisement.

'It's situated at the foothills of the *Nilgiris* . . .' she began, but the dean cut her off.

'In Tamil Nadu?' he asked, and then took a pause, as if to rethink the credibility of his geographical acumen about South India. A half-minute long recollection strengthened his conviction to speak further.

'That is too far for our students to travel, Ms Roy! Why would you assume that their parents would allow this?' he asked, with raised brows.

‘It is not an assumption, *sir*. I already asked them to get signed consent forms for the trip before I started discussing this with the Senior Wing Headmistress.’ Mitali wasn’t just namedropping; her conversation with Ms Juneja had indeed been a motivational factor. The former class-teacher-and-now-headmistress had taken pleasantly to the idea for a field trip, and had praised Mitali’s foresight about getting signed consent forms for the kids.

‘And what about the costs?’ the dean asked, delicately. It wasn’t school policy to fund trips that could be categorized as workshops. It had always been that way at The Presidency, courtesy the rich kids who inhabited their classrooms.

‘That, too, has been sorted out. The participating students, whose names you will find on these,’ she said, extending the set of forms for the dean to reach out and grab, ‘have agreed to incur travel, food and residential expenses. All we need to pay is the workshop registration fee—which is a onetime charge for *all* participating schools.’ She had stressed the word *all* in the hope of a follow-up question. She wasn’t disappointed.

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‘When you say *all* schools . . .’ the dean began, but Mitali already had her answer ready.

‘Doon School is sending a team of five senior students to the trip.’ She finished quickly, and she could sense her own anticipation building up. She was counting on the childish competitiveness of this man to influence his decision.

The dean twirled the consent forms in a cylinder and played with the arrangement, rotating it between his overgrown fingers, before looking up with his utterly popular look of agreement. Some had chosen to accept this gesture as a non-existent nod.

‘How many kids are we sending out?’ he asked finally, opening the forms wide and adjusting his thin-rimmed spectacles at the same time.

‘Five, as per the current requests. In fact these are the kids who were able to justify their applications for the workshop.’

‘Do you have their names?’ he asked again.

‘Yes—you’ll find them on the forms, too. Yuvraj, Ananya, Natasha,

Vikrant and Shreya,' she finished.

'Well,' he began, with a deep breath, reminiscent of a *sigh*, 'I hope you know that I'm not doing this to ape the guys at Doon, okay?'

'Well of course! Not *technically*, anyway!' She smiled at him, and hoped that it would be the end of all conversations and discussions regarding the issue. The principal's unspoken rule about trying to compete with The Doon Boys Academy and never admitting it openly was quite well-known. People spoke about in hushed whispers, and every one tried to use it to their advantage when it was possible for them to do so.

She walked out with the same confidence in her eyes, and somehow enjoyed a bit more as the stares fell on her again. *Men will be men.*

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Chapter Two

Recovery for Dummies

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Natasha had never been a big fan of Eminem's music. Lately, she found herself getting easily irritated at the frequent bouts of rap music issuing from rudely spiked up earphones, and some decided to go all-out with their multimedia phones. There were two reasons why she found rap music uninteresting.

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1. She was seventeen and seventeen-year old girls shouldn't have to go through the pain of discovering what *recovery* feels like. Until very recently, she had devoted all of her time towards destroying the one person responsible for her downfall at school. She wanted to change that and rap music didn't go too well with her idea of *constructive* behaviour.

2. All her friends indulged in the open mockery of Justin Bieber at Social sites. But secretly, she was a fan.

The fact that *Vicky*, out of all people, had turned up to be a big fan of rap music, didn't help either. He was the perfect high-school wannabe as far as Natasha was concerned, and she was very clear about this in her own head—she could not be seen adopting things that Vicky liked doing, or appreciating the kind of music that he listened to. It had taken her *months* to rebuild a fraction of her lost reputation, and even with her newly acquired thoughts on *constructive behaviour*, she was still Natasha Malhotra.

At the outset of a surprisingly mellow winter, Natasha found herself in

the scary reality of being nearly friendless.

'And all of *this*,' she thought to herself, 'will have been for an absurd choice in music!'

One of the few silver linings of her life was the re-emergence of her own mother, who had shown unbelievable amounts of affection towards her adolescent daughter—almost as if she was trying to make up for all the time she had lost out on. And Natasha wasn't doing too badly on the reconciliation front. She was finally ready to forget the abandonment that Mrs Malhotra had put her husband and child through. She constantly called out to her mother when she was at home and she felt good when she did it.

Natasha had read about the phrase 'solitary bliss' in the pages of pretentiously huge books by authors with unpronounceable names. 'Maybe,' she thought, 'maybe I'm living through solitary bliss.'

Her mother, with her newfound bouts of adulation towards her only daughter, seldom denied Natasha any chance to redeem her daughter-ness in any way conceivable. Bedtime curfews and sleepover schedules could now be extended at the whim and fancy of Natasha's seventeen-year old mind. People kept telling her that it was an impressionable age, but *whatever*, right?

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Anyway, the open acceptance of Natasha's whims by her mother had proven to be an effective medium of persuading her father when it came to the *trip*.

'Are you sure you'll be fine all by yourself?' her dad had asked, in his usual concerned voice. 'At least run it by your mother, let's see what she has to say.'

'I already checked with her, dad! She bought me *this*, look!' And Natasha had sprung up like the dollish semblance of a child, excited to demonstrate the capabilities of her new camera. Her dad smiled at her.

Earlier that week, their new English teacher, Mitali Roy—the young and vibrant Mitali Roy—had proposed a class trip to Masinagudi, a little known hideout along the south-eastern coast of India. To be honest, Natasha's reasons to be a part of this trip hadn't really been driven by any profound sense of loyalty towards the art of wielding a camera. She, in fact, had completely discarded and possibly even laughed a little bit, when Ms Roy

had told the entire class about this so-called *photography project* with her perfect full-teethed smile. The boys, as usual, had ogled and nodded their heads in acceptance.

Ironically, the only guy in her class who *didn't* ogle at the new teacher was the one who eventually showed the most interest in this workshop. Natasha had wondered at her own discovery of the fact that Yuvraj, of all people, had been a camera freak. He had never mentioned to Natasha, during their painstakingly long, former *relationship* about how he had saved up large chunks of his allowances to buy himself the latest DSLR. And when Ms Roy had finished talking about the workshop, Yuvraj—to everyone's surprise—had stood up from his seat and spoken for about twenty minutes on a host of topics, about how *photography* was his guilty pleasure, about shutter sensitivity, about light intensity, about creative *vision* and what not.

'Besides, in a few months' time, all of us will be busy with our college schedules,' Yuvraj had said. 'This could possibly be our only chance to go out into the real world while we're still at school and learn something new!'

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Before easing back into his seat, Yuvraj had looked hopefully at Ananya, not Natasha. As if he expected Ananya to say yes to the trip with him. Natasha invariably felt pangs of pain whenever that happened. It was one thing to *accept* that her position had been drawn out; *completely* another thing to experience it as she walked by, minding her own business.

Until just about a year back. Natasha would have been the one getting all of Yuvraj's attention—not Ananya. *She* would have been the one to encourage Yuvraj about his photographic interests, their teacher Mitali Roy would have patted Yuvraj and *Natasha* after handing out the consent forms. But all Natasha could do that day was to stare silently on, with her best friend Shreya next to her—as Ananya lapped up the accolades.

The thing is, even with Yuvraj being out of her life, Natasha often found it difficult to get his image out of her fantasies. His confession about photography had triggered another fantasy in Natasha's head now—one where she would be a high-end, scantily clad anorexic model and he would be the wild and carefree, hot bod photographer. That had been the coaxing point. But as she started learning more about the kind of life that photographers led, she became increasingly inclined to participate in the

workshop.

According to a news report published online, a successful wildlife photographer drew an eight figure annual salary on an average. It was ridiculous to think of any profession by imagining yourself at the helm of it, but Natasha knew herself well enough to decide that she could learn the art of mastering any technique so long as it was taught tastefully.

She had also read up about the highly awarded and recognized Mr Sanjib Desai. He had worked with almost all major brands in the recent past, having started his career as a wildlife photographer himself. He had then moved on to dabble in fashion photography—before turning into a trainer for newbies and intermediate professionals in the business.

In a newspaper interview, which sported a photograph of Mr Desai, he was quoted as saying, 'Nobody is immortal. My life, art and vision have been distastefully sold out for the spiteful enjoyment of lesser mortals. Now, every time I allow someone else to hold a camera the way I do, it's because I want to leave behind a better legacy—one that keeps me alive.'

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Natasha liked reading that interview. Sanjib Desai was *totally* fit to be her mentor, as far as she was concerned.

Their teacher Mitali Roy had been easy to convince, too. People had later spoken about how the new teacher's hidden agenda about the workshop had made her forgo scrutiny of all applying candidates.

Natasha, however—was thankful about the discrepancy in selection—for she had been just the next person to sign up for the trip after Yuvraj. But she also rued how Mitali Roy had skipped through the process of verifying credentials for all the other applicants. She, for instance, couldn't fathom how *Vicky* of all people had managed to scrape in to the trip. Natasha suspected that Mitali Roy's selection process revolved around basic criteria and nothing else—first come, first serve—get a signed consent form and you're on.

'He *never* tries to click pictures!' Natasha was silently complaining about Vicky's inclusion to her friend Shreya.

'I *know*. Look, I know you don't like hearing this a lot—but I'm pretty sure that he just wants to come 'cos you're on the trip,' Shreya explained.

‘What? So he still didn’t get over his crush?’ Natasha asked, sighing. She never realized how her eyebrows got displaced every time she asked a genuine question.

‘No! It’ll take him time, and a *lot* of closure, to get over you,’ Shreya said. ‘And you of all people should be talking about moving on!’ She was hinting at the fact that Natasha herself had been motivated to join the workshop because of Yuvraj, but she ignored that remark. She still wished that Mitali Roy would announce some impossible criteria which only allowed her and Yuvraj to participate. But that announcement, sadly never came.

As a result, her only true nemesis *Ananya*, too, had successfully signed up for the workshop. Maybe it had been to accompany Yuvraj or maybe it was just because she was just insecure about Natasha being on the trip with Yuvraj. Natasha found it much more pleasurable to believe in the insecurity angle. It had been a long time since anyone had felt insecure about being in her company. She was also thankful about the fact that her best friend *Shreya* was a part of the entourage. Confiding was something that Natasha didn’t really believe in, but she agreed to herself that it wasn’t the worst of things. Having a friend in the perpetual *solitary bliss* was just as good as finding Italian chocolate at the local candy shop.

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With all the factors surrounding the trip, above everything else, Natasha was *happy* about the whole affair. This was different.

‘This must mean I’m recovering,’ she told herself, and smiled.

In completely different corners of the country, two other people were busy trying *not* to think about the very same workshop.

Chapter Three

North and South

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The rabbit was chasing him all around the room, even as he tried his best at outrunning him, he found himself losing speed every minute. The faster he seemed to run, the bigger the rabbit seemed to get, until its protruding teeth were almost touching the back of his spine. The moment he stopped, he met his old nightmare nemesis—the tall black man who smuggled golden boots. He held up a gun in his hands and aimed straight for his heart.

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Behind him, was the bloodthirsty giant rabbit, and ahead of him—the mad gunman. His mind did the only thing which could've helped him at the time, and he woke up.

'No! Stop!' he found himself saying—at the vast, enclosed expanse of light peach themed walls and mahogany furniture.

When an unshaven, stale-faced Abhinav Gandhi looked around himself, all he saw was chaos. So he churned his eyes once again, just to confirm that he wasn't dreaming. The feebly beeping alarm clock screamed a bit louder and reality started sinking in.

Phew, he thought as the remains of the previous night's nightmare began to subside. He was not, as he had imagined, locked in the den of a golden-boot smuggler. Instead, he was quite comfortably confined to his safe and well-guarded dormitory room. Abhinav, as people would say, had since long been miles away from the earshot of any amount of trouble, and he always told himself that he was on the lookout for it. Why, then, he hadn't been

seriously injured in the past few years was beyond him. He had never suffered from a fractured bone or bitten by anything other than a mosquito. And at his current place of boarding, even mosquitoes were hard to find.

The Doon Academy for Boys, his *alma mater* or anything that came close to that definition on any given day, was not the place where boys went to get bitten by mosquitoes. It was hard enough to seek admission in the first place—you either had to be really, really rich, or really, really smart. Abhinav Gandhi was both of those things. He liked to believe that the smartness was something he had in himself, not hereditary. The money came from a Gujarati conglomerate of businesses that had dared to call itself a *family*. Abhinav had loathed every minute that he had spent at the Gandhi household in Ahmedabad. In heavy contrast to the image of an ever-popular, *friendly* dairy brand, the people who inhabited his ancestral bungalow hardly managed to co-exist. The suffocation, among other incomprehensible emotions, had driven Abhinav to seek refuge at this wonderful institution.

But like all wonderful things, the school too was slowly losing its charm. For starters, they were in their senior year now and in a span of months, it would be time to bid good bye to the only place where he didn't have to worry about silly things like which aunt managed to pull off his grandmother's *naulakha* diamond necklace. According to Abhinav, the reason why he advertised his social profile on Facebook as "Lives in Dehradun, Hometown—Dehradun" was simple. There was no streak of ego or shame in imagining himself as a part of a money-hungry Gujarati business clan. He just didn't see himself doing the things that his father and uncle were doing (and some of his elder cousins, too). Sometimes, when he couldn't sleep and closed his eyes to induce it, he could see flashes of his own past with disturbing amount of clarity.

He was nine years old. Memories of a barbaric boarding school for young boys always managed to haunt him, even when he whimpered in his sleep and his beautiful fairy of an elder sister held his hand tight. She was the one person he could confide in; the only soul whom he didn't hate as much as he hated the rest of the world.

'I'm scared, di!' he said, nudging into the comfort of her arms. She was running her hand on his head, trying to console him.

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‘Shh . . . Abhi, it was just a nightmare. You’re safe now, you’re at home. You’re with me and Chubby, and we won’t anything happen to our little prince, will we?’ Their pet rabbit ‘Chubby’ had big eyes, and Abhinav immediately felt at ease, looking into those inexplicably big eyes. He looked at his sister, and knew that the world was a better place to be in.

At present. Abhinav composed himself. *Recollections of a past that has no chance of ever returning isn’t going to help me.* He kept telling himself over and over again, every time his mind played tricks. The nightmares continued, though. His rebellion at home had been a calculated affair, and just as he had finished his tenth grade board examinations, he knew he had the perfect excuse to run away from home. In his battle against ever-expanding, smoothy traditions, education was the weapon he had chosen to empower himself with. But somewhere down the line, deceitful emotions and passions had managed to cling on to the shell of his life. That’s the reason why his cell phone was lined with pictures of the dark skinned Urvashi Nambiar today, his Facebook chat buddy. Over a period of three weeks, he had tried to convert his passive friendship with her into an almost meaningful long-term relationship, but he had failed miserably in his attempts to do so. He had begun to contemplate that physical intimacy was a prerequisite to all relationships.

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Words like *hobby* or *girlfriend* had always been the adornments of *cool* kids and although Abhinav had been embellished as the *quiet-types*, he never truly achieved the distinction of being singled out as someone desirable, someone worth talking to. And when you live in an institution inhabited solely by boys, it kind of takes precedence to retain your heterosexuality over your social popularity. Abhinav had resorted to Facebook to find love, like so many other friends who stayed in Gujarat and bragged about their online achievements.

Before Urvashi happened, Abhinav had enjoyed almost zero success in his quest to befriend the online *hotties* of his generation. Abhinav also learnt to carefully assess all Facebook profiles to look for fakes, after a few painful experiences. People were seldom who they claimed to be, and at times when he was fooled by easy connivers, Abhinav blamed his own decision of enrolling at boarding school. Urvashi was an exception—by the standards of her fashion sense; she didn’t seem intent on exposing any part of her body

other than her face. *Sarees* and *salwar kameezes* adorned her lean physique in almost every picture.

'You're cute!' That had been the first comment which he had posted on her profile picture, as soon as she had accepted his friend request. He really hadn't expected a reply—and was presumably surprised when the girl decided to reply, not with a comment—but with a deceptive 'Hello there!' on the chat box.

'Hi!' he had responded, wondering whether this girl silently suffered from the same loneliness that surrounded him at all times. Their conversations slowly extended beyond the usual discussions about student life and it's perks. Suddenly, this girl had transformed into an object of interest for him; she was someone he could think of, whenever he was trying to escape his own nightmares.

'Maybe,' he told himself, 'maybe this is where I am naïve.'

Truth be told, Abhinav wasn't much of a photographer himself. But one of the perks of being born into a family of means is that you get surplus gifts that can be utilized in moments of need.

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When the dark-skinned girl from Good Shepherd International School at Ooty told him about the photography workshop, Abhinav had at once seized the opportunity to present himself as an enthusiast. His newly acquired Nikon D500 camera helped. And it was really easy to quote numbers from the user manual that came with the camera. Urvashi was impressed.

Urvashi Nambiar, in her free time, liked to despise that time. She loved being busy. Everyone at her school tried their best not to acknowledge the fact that they knew her, and more often than not, Urvashi didn't seem to have a problem with that predicament.

The other day, when her mother enquired about Urvashi's social life (like all prying parents love to do), Urvashi had resorted to bluffing. As far as her parents knew, their daughter enjoyed a pleasant amount of popularity among her friends. She wasn't keen to burst that bubble quite as of yet. She didn't really hate her own parents the way most of her peers did, and in her own head, she believed in their arguments about wearing the right kind of clothes in public. Yes, she wanted to be a rebel. But she never advertised it.

‘*Appu*,’ her mother called out to her with her usual nickname, ‘daddy told me to get you something in green, for your birthday. When do you want to go shopping?’

In her mind, Urvashi wanted to say *never*. She had often been scared by the idea that she might just be schizophrenic. After all, wasn’t thinking about something and saying something else entirely out loud—a sign of madness? She could never bring herself to decline an offer made by her mother, even though she held no attachment towards the ridiculous clothing which her parents bought her. She already knew that *something in green* would eventually turn out to be an embroidered *kurti* with golden borders—with probably no hints of green. But she kept her smiling face on, mostly to please her mother and said, ‘Thursday would be fine.’

‘*Appu*, try this one . . . *Appu*, how does this one look on you? *Appu* . . . I wonder if they have this one in your size . . .’ Her mother kept calling out to her that Thursday, as they sat inside the superbly sweaty interiors of a certain Nalli Silk Emporium.

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In her head, Urvashi kept wishing for two things—

1. An excuse for her to get out and buy that super sexy hipster that she knew she couldn’t *ever* wear.

2. For her mother to somehow lose the recollection of ever using the nickname *Appu*. It sounded ultra lame, and every time her mother used the word, she pretended to look away, as if she didn’t know who was being called out. People figured it out, though—and she watched helplessly as their mouths twitched in pity and sarcastic smiles.

The next day, before running off to school, she paid a visit to the shop right next to *Nalli* and hurriedly paid off the startled shopkeeper for the hipster and a T-shirt, packing them into her school backpack without an attempt to even try them on.

At home, she returned to her inglorious, studious, goody-girl goggles and sat down with her books, skimming over chapters and problems that she could read and solve with one hand tied behind her back. When she wasn’t busy mastering advanced pre-calculus, she tried to help her mother with household chores. The only thing which wasn’t mundane in her otherwise

routine life was her love for the camera lens. And yet again, in contrast to girls her age, she never saw herself in front of the camera; she would always be the one wielding it.

She tried to flatter her mother at times, by wielding her camera in the midst of the day when her father wasn't looking, and she would make her mother pose with various facial expressions. In turn, she would set up a self-timer and ask her mother to hold the camera steady while she pouted for her own pictures. She didn't like talking about her photographic passions in front of her father, and that was mainly because she was pretty scared of the disapproving looks that he so often gave her at almost anything that she did which remotely came close to the very basic definition of being *fun*.

At school—it was a different story altogether. Her teachers, almost all of them knew about her many talents. She had been good at sports, too. She was an excellent aim-and-throw expert and would have been a viable candidate for the senior women's basketball team, but right after she attained puberty, she quickly discovered the kind of clothes that her family wished her to wear and basketball gear wasn't one of them. Fearing an argument between her parents back at home, she had stayed away from basketball ever since.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Good Shepherd International School took pride in its ability to identify stellar talent in its young pupils; and the administration tried to ensure that optimal resources were spent trying to nurture that talent. Their department of vocational training was thrilled whenever they spotted a student decidedly straying away from the latest *Rajnikanth* starrer in order to read a book or to write a poem. So when the rest of Urvashi's class had rushed in a herd to the first-day-first-show of *Endhiran – The Robot*, she instead entered the school premises to apply for the photography workshop, they knew that this girl wasn't kidding. But they had to carefully assess her ability to present herself; Sanjib Desai was no joke.

The school authorities also prided themselves over their role in orchestrating this workshop. Hijacking a premiere wildlife photographer, entrusting him with the responsibility of hosting a workshop for kids and then actually getting him *excited* about it was no mean task.

People said a lot of things about Sanjib Desai. Some claimed that senility had overtaken the once-mighty photographer in after the passing of his prime.

Some anonymous reports of his strange behaviour during workshops had surfaced every now and then, which made it difficult for them to settle on a singular choice for hosting this workshop.

But Sanjib Desai hadn't shown either enthusiasm or disinterest towards the project. The people who represented Mr Desai had indicated that his mannerism of indifference was just his way of displaying amicability, and that it shouldn't be read into any further than necessary. Reading between the lines wasn't a specialty for the good people at Good Shepherd, and they had been happy at the outcome of the arrangement. Invitations had been sent out to other schools, so that they could send in their students too. At this point, Mr Desai's office had communicated that the man wanted the workshop to be exclusive.

'Being *exclusive* is almost synonymous with Mr Desai. He doesn't believe in the dime-a-dozen form of training. Send us your best, and nothing but the best,' were the exact words in the memorandum of acceptance.

The same good people had then fallen into a dilemma, for their best candidate, undoubtedly was Urvashi Nambiar and everyone knew how protective her parents were.

@BOOKHOUSE1

The Nambiar family wasn't a big believer in letting their family girls go on trips, unaccompanied by supervising adults from within the community.

'You are certainly joking,' Mr Nambiar had remarked, when the proposal had been presented to him. 'This is ridiculous!' and he had thrust the unsigned consent form into the student advisor's face.

'It says right here that we accept full responsibility for any harm that may fall upon her during the workshop! You expect me to sign that?' he thundered.

'Look, Mr Nambiar—all of the paperwork is just standard procedure, nothing else. We assure you that Urvashi will be in safe hands. And besides, it's an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!'

He hadn't budged, until he was allowed to take a peek at some of his daughter's clicks. He had been speechless. He didn't seem to come up with a good excuse, denying his daughter the chance to learn from someone who was quite possibly the most trusted name in photography. Urvashi had been

on the ninth cloud upon learning that her father had agreed to let her go.

‘Thank you, thank you, thank you,’ she kept saying and kissed her father on his stubbly cheek, who was all the more flabbergasted. Her mother kept looking at the father-daughter duo with a look of surprise, for she couldn’t believe her own eyes either.

Urvashi couldn’t wait to tell Abhinav—she pinged him with news of her father’s acceptance on Facebook, with a dozen smileys. Abhinav had responded in a span of thirty minutes.

‘My tickets are done, too! I’m flying out this weekend,’ Abhinav had just pinged her.

‘Are your tickets confirmed? When are you flying to Chennai?’ he had asked her next.

‘Well, I don’t really need *reservations*, Masinagudi is a two-hour drive from Ooty, and my dad’s going to drop me off at Singara Checkpost,’ she replied.

@BOOKHOUSE1

His question followed after a gap of five seconds. ‘Isn’t that the point beyond which you aren’t allowed to drive your own vehicles?’ Abhinav was gleeful at his ability to google information fast enough to make it seem like inherent knowledge. And he knew that profound knowledge impressed Urvashi.

The two of them had spent a lot of time researching the place where the trip was being organized. Masinagudi was a little-known rainforest in Tamil Nadu, and the venue was a wildlife resort managed by ex-army personnel. The only person, whom Abhinav knew to have been to the place, was another Facebook acquaintance; and he wasn’t much of a talker. Wikipedia helped.

The roads in the rainforest weren’t finished with asphalt and were mostly muddy. By government regulations, personal vehicles weren’t allowed beyond a certain point known as the Singara Checkpost and visitors were required to be escorted via government 4x4 vehicles only. As he discussed the specifics of the trip with his Facebook girl, he could almost visualize the breathtaking beauty of that place.

‘Aren’t you excited?’ he asked her, trying to control his enthusiasm by

avoiding an All-Caps chat conversation.

Urvashi typed ‘Hell yeah’ into the chat box. What she had intended to type, was ‘To see you.’ But sometimes, she told herself—feelings are best left undisclosed.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Chapter Four

The Riddle

@BOOKHOUSE1

Ananya was getting anxious. Although she had volunteered to accompany Yuvraj for the workshop, she was secretly worried that it might harm his chances of scoring well in the IIT-JEE exams that lay ahead of him. She had seen him toiling away with great dedication in the past week, and the sudden emergence of a distraction worried her. In the past few weeks, Yuvraj had spoken to her about how his father wanted him to sit for both the JEE and the SAT examinations. For Yuvraj, it was either IIT-JEE or any of the top ten Ivy League Engineering schools in the US. This fact troubled Ananya more than anything else, and had felt an unbearable need to stop Yuvraj from participating, initially, when the plans for the workshop had been explained to them.

@BOOKHOUSE1

The only reason she didn't say anything out loud to him, was because of the gleam that she saw in his eyes when Mitali Roy had first mentioned the trip.

'Sanjib Desai! Ananya, can you believe it? We're going to get a one-on-one hands-on training on handling the lens by Sanjib-freaking-Desai!' He had a certain amount of ecstasy in his voice, even as he held her with both hands around her waist. She had always blushed and closed her eyes when he did that, but she couldn't bring herself to explain the tingling sensation that coursed through her body whenever Yuvraj touched her.

'I'm happy for you, Yuvraj!' she said, trying to match the grin on his face with a troubled smile. She succeeded.

‘Look, I’m sorry you had to go through that squabble at home, but I can’t help marvelling over the fact that you and I are actually going away for entire weekend!’ he said, his grin wider than ever.

They were standing outside the school canteen. Mitali Roy had confirmed the news of the trip being formally accepted by the dean minutes earlier, in her own classroom. One of the joys of being a student at The Presidency Convent was the ability to rush out of classrooms without a lot of inquisition from the attending teacher. Mitali Roy’s friendly attitude toward her students only helped the matter. She had excused all five participants to get out of the classroom and to start making preparations for the visit.

Luckily, Natasha Malhotra didn’t have to waste a lot time in packing. She almost always had her Wildcraft backpack ready, and the in-house maids did most of the work on her luggage. All she had to do was to choose the right colours and to make sure that the first-aid medical supplies weren’t expired. Trekking had been her father’s idea of the perfect father-daughter vacation; one that never got fulfilled. But the ever-ready luggage was a relief for her right now. It also gave her time to help her not-so-organized friend, Shreya.

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘These are purple,’ Shreya said, shaking her head at the scarves that Natasha had bought for them. ‘I’m so not wearing purple!’

‘Oh, I don’t think your choice in colours is going to be an effective argument. I’ve looked it up online—the place is freezing almost all year round!’ Natasha countered. She knew how much her friend hated *all* scarves and was wise beyond her years to know that the argument about colours was just a clever ruse to fend off the scarves.

‘But it’s summer, Natasha!’ Shreya whined.

‘I know. But we can’t afford to catch a cold on the trip and you know it.’ Natasha knew she had won the argument. From what the two of them had understood so far, Masinagudi was a really, really cold place, and the hilly terrain didn’t care much for the seasons that passed by. Being close to an ocean can have such advantages. Mumbling slowly under her breath, Shreya packed the two purple scarves into her backpack. She had also attempted to sneak in another item of interest, past Natasha’s gaze. But she didn’t succeed.

Natasha had spotted the cover quite easily—as it stood out among the

other kitsch that was crammed into it.

'*Great Expectations?*' Natasha asked, startled. She had never known Shreya to be much of a reader, let alone one who would be interested in the works of Charles Dickens. Natasha herself didn't read much, except the latest issues of Cosmopolitan and Vogue, of course. She had expected her peer and best-friend-incumbent to have similar tastes. Judging by the look on Shreya's face—she wasn't too keen in disclosing this side of her own self quite yet.

'Dad got it for me on my last birthday,' Shreya, herself found it difficult to explain why exactly she was packing the book into her backpack. Truth be told, she had attempted to finish reading the book ever since she had seen the movie, only she never had any huge stretch of time. And lugging an old classic by Dickens into the school campus often brought with itself the risk of being labelled a pseudo-intellectual. Shreya didn't think she could afford that.

When Natasha continued glaring, Shreya decided to cut the discussion loose while she still could.

'Let's not talk about it, okay?' she asked, widening her eyes and arching her brows to look like she was pleading.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Back at school, Ananya was still enjoying the pleasure of watching Yuvraj take fast notes as they browsed through the Wikipedia profile of Sanjib Desai.

'Some people call him an eccentric expert!' Yuvraj noted, his eyes fixated on the dim glow of the screen.

Ananya smiled silently as she looked at him and then she looked around herself. They were sitting, almost alone in the semi-deserted computer lab on the third floor of the senior wing department. There was once a time when she and Yuvraj, keen on discovering the finer pleasures of fresh, young love, used to venture into the lab during after-hours and snuggle up. Yuvraj was always the guy who tried taking strides and chances with physical intimacy. She remembered him as he one who had initiated their first kiss, despite her cute, faltering inhibitions. How she wished those moments would return!

Their equation had undergone an irreversible change, one that occurs when couples evolve into people who understand what it means to be in a committed relationship. What had happened couldn't have been held up

forever and she knew that, too. As time goes on, people fight and people make up. People kiss and people forget fights. People find greater pleasure in forgiving others than holding grudges. All of this eventually helps in strengthening bonds, she knew that too. To an extent, she was perhaps glad that they were still together, they had made it to the other side of the fence and there were almost no insecurities to drive them crazy. But a part of those insecure moments seemed to have contained an air of passion, a curtain of pleasurable thrills, which wasn't seen anymore. She wondered if there was a way to relive that passion.

'And there was one time when a male model went and complained to the ethics board that Mr Desai made him wear too many clothes!' Yuvraj was grinning as he said the words, as he had scrolled almost to the bottom of Sanjib Desai's biography. He was browsing through the *controversies* section on Wikipedia. But this time, he took a moment's pause and turned his face to look at Ananya. He was mildly surprised to see that her eyes were still on him, just as they had been when he had sat down at the system. He closed the page down.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Say something,' he said, now turning fully to face Ananya.

'You really love the lens, don't you, baby?' she asked him, almost in a trance.

'Yes. I do. But not as much as I love you!' he countered quickly, and watched as the tiny grin on Ananya's face spread out into a big smile. He loved those moments. He couldn't tell her that it was those very moments that he would love to capture on his lens, the most.

He held her hand between his palms and kissed it slowly. Ananya's hand shivered a bit. He loved that, too.

❀ ❀ ❀

Mitali Roy's office wasn't similar to any other teacher's quarters. For starters, she had installed a 5.1 surround sound speaker system around the room. She had also decorated the walls of her office with posters of musicians and theatre artists. On her desk, she enjoyed the presence of framed specimens of both her own clicks as well as those of her *guru*. She had cribbed for hours with the dean, about the colour of paint of the walls,

but that was one whim that never got fulfilled. The dean had been very strict when he informed her that the walls, at any cost, could *not* be painted black.

She did, however succeed in getting her choice of furniture—she had brought in an old heirloom into the office space. It was an armchair, inherited through her grandfather. Amid mild objections by school authorities, she had made a valid point that she hardly ever spent time mingling with the other teachers, discussing grading patterns in the staff room. And the chair, she had explained, was an excellent medium for her to meditate and work on stuff that she needed to explain to the students later. It was the only way she knew to work.

Right now, it wasn't working. She (and every other student representative for The Desai Workshop across the nation) had received a parcel after the initial registration was completed. It consisted of the weirdest assortment of materials and could hardly be called a welcome kit. It contained a wanderer's map of the Masinagudi forest estates, starting at the Singara Checkpost, leading right up to the edge of the *unexplored* wilderness. That part was highlighted with a red marker. But there was no explanatory note with the map, which put Sanjib's intentions on a questionable pedestal. As far as she had known the man in her college days, he was very unpredictable. And as much as she wanted to get back into the lens-game herself (and thereby compelled to indulge the borderline psychotic exercises that Sanjib was famous for), she was still aware of her position as a teacher and she knew that she was responsible for the safety of all the kids who were participating.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Sanjib however had made it very clear that he wanted complete cooperation from all participating parties. He had outlined the workshop plan to be divided into four stages:

1. An Introductory session on basic camera operation guidelines
2. An Explorative study of the Masinagudi Estate
3. The Riddle
4. The Departure Campfire

In essence, three out of the four elements presented in Sanjib Desai's plan appeared to be harmless. And Mitali had known him well enough to anticipate something similar to point #3. Anybody who was a worthy

acquaintance of the eccentric genius could guess that a workshop organized by him would definitely incorporate a treasure hunt.

Now ideally, when a quizmaster plans an intriguing contest for kids, he/she would be expected to present the solution to an impartial representative. However, Sanjib was known for his audacious amounts of secrecy and his tendency to openly challenge people of all ages.

This time, he had gone a step ahead: The first part of the so-called riddle had been sent on a piece of parchment, with instructions to *Read it aloud to all participants.*

He had also enclosed details of the prize involved, which shook the very ground beneath Mitali's feet as she read the description.

It was a *Hasselblad H4D-60* Digital SLR camera, one that boasted a sensor of sixty freaking megapixels and sported a price tag upwards of $40,000. Every serious photography enthusiast had, at one time or the other, drooled over the prospect of owning one of these, and the only live prototype that Mitali had seen with her own eyes, had been the one that almost always hung loosely across Sanjib Desai's shoulders with a neck-strap. During the days of her own course with Sanjib, he had disclosed his intentions to upgrade his own equipment someday. This would mean that Desai was planning to give away his private camera as a prize up for grabs.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Mitali almost wished that she could be sixteen again, of course, for entirely different purposes than most adults do.

She read and re-read the parchment a number of times, but couldn't understand anything out of the weird combination of words. It seemed like medieval prose when she thought about it, and it pained her to realize that she, the English teacher of the school, couldn't break the riddle down. She hoped to comprehend it better once they were in Sanjib's vicinity, at the venue.

However, as per Sanjib's explicit instructions, she was obliged to read out the contents of the parchment to her students. And as she gathered them around the next day, to dictate the riddle, Abhinav in his dormitory at Doon and Urvashi in her bedroom in Ooty were reading the same words.

". . . You may believe that survival is a game for those who play. Yet

the smartest of the herd will save the day. The greatest victory lies not in breaking your shells open, but in looking beyond them. May the best pair of eyes win . . .”

‘Wait, what *is* that?’ Shreya asked her friend with twitchy feet, but Natasha was already busy noting down the words frantically so she wouldn’t forget them. Natasha had decided—if she was going to do this, she was going to do it right.

The only person who spoke up from this group after Mitali had finished reading was Vicky. He was still carrying his iPod and it was blaring some incomprehensible rap lyrics as he held the earphones in his left palm. After hearing the puzzle, he seemed to brood for a moment and then said, ‘I’m out’.

‘What?’ Mitali asked him as he uttered the words.

‘I’m out. As in, I’m not going. I’m sorry, but this man you’re talking about seems like a weirdo and I’m not lining up to learn from some weirdo. Natasha, I think you shouldn’t go either,’ and he pretended to look at her with a note of concern.

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘*Dude, are you for real or what?*’ she mouthed silently, and continued standing where she stood. Vicky silently left the room, leaving the four of them to Mitali.

To Mitali’s surprise, none of the other three students seemed to object or even be mildly interested in Vicky calling it quits.

Neither Ananya nor Yuvraj made any attempts to note down or memorize the riddle. Ananya, for one, really didn’t feel any compulsion to try and win the camera being offered. She still wanted to help Yuvraj in getting there, but judging by the look on his face, his thoughts seemed to concur with hers. It was definitely pointless to think about the riddle before they got to Masinagudi.

❀ ❀ ❀

In an engaging conversation on Facebook, Abhinav was trying to put the same argument across at Urvashi.

‘Don’t worry about it before we get there!’ He had typed in.

Urvashi knew better than to acknowledge or accept that sentiment. She had been brought up in Ooty and was well aware of what the rainforests of the region contained. The mysterious nature of the puzzle was clearer to her than any other participant, as she knew what the place was capable of offering.

'It's not going to be that easy,' she pinged back and after a brief pause, she added, 'you'll figure out when you get there, though.'

'But that's exactly what I told you!' came Abhinav's reply.

'You don't understand right now—but trust me, I bet you'll start thinking about this riddle the very minute after stepping across the Singara Checkpost.' And she added a winking smiley after that. Abhinav had no idea what that meant, but he sent a winking smiley back too.

Abhinav's brownie points with the dean at his institution had helped a lot in securing a workshop seat with Mr Desai. But no other student within his peers seemed to be interested in the project, and ultimately, their principal had to acquire the direct contact number for Sanjib Desai and given it to Abhinav. He had been informed that all his dealings with Mr Desai would be exclusive, and the school would remain out of the picture. He wasn't even allotted an accompanying teacher. Apparently, Mr Desai had agreed to this arrangement, too.

@BOOKHOUSE1

He later learnt that as the dates for the workshop grew nearer, the number of participants were going down.

Good he thought to himself. Lesser people meant lesser competition.

Chapter Five

The Rendezvous

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘Will you cut that out, please? I’ve had enough of you irritating me with that book. People are looking at us, and I bet they think you’re avoiding me!’ Natasha screamed, positively scratching into Shreya’s skin, trying to get her to shut her book. But Shreya wouldn’t listen much—after every few minutes; she would throw back a customary ‘huh’ which preceded the length of her periodic yawns.

@BOOKHOUSE1

The five of them—Mitali, Yuvraj, Ananya, Natasha and Shreya had flown to Chennai that afternoon, and almost everybody with the exception of Shreya had enjoyed a pleasant nap during the flight. She had kept herself on her pre-decided reading schedule.

‘Oh my god I’m in love with this *Pip* guy!’ Shreya said, slamming the pages of the book together with her index finger acting as a crude bookmark.

‘Seriously! Give it a rest already, girl!’ Natasha said, glaring at her. ‘We’re supposed to drive out to that Singara Checkpost or whatever, in an hour’s time.’

They were waiting outside the baggage claim zone. Yuvraj and Ananya had scooted off to the airport souvenir shops, and he was busy trying to buy a pendant for her while she refused. Their teacher, Mitali Roy, was still trying to catch hold of her luggage on the carousel and ended up missing it every time.

When it finally arrived, Mitali breathed a sigh of relief and began dialling

to the cab service. She was disheartened to know that the vehicle which had been booked to escort them to the Checkpost was running an hour late due to city traffic.

‘Excuse me, are you Mitali Roy from The Presidency Convent?’ A voice spoke up behind her, creeping her out of her misery.

‘Umm . . . Yes, do I know you?’ She said, turning around to face a young boy who couldn’t be more than seventeen years old of age. He was wearing knee length army patterned capris and a loosely hung ‘Che Guevera’ T-shirt, and was carrying a backpack himself, one that still contained the airport security tag for cabin baggage. He looked remarkably out of place in the setting, considering the fact that all her students were still dressed in uniform. (The Presidency’s code dictated thus, since their departure that morning had begun from within the school campus)

‘I don’t think so. I’m Abhinav Gandhi from The Doon School. Mr Desai told me that I’d find you here at the airport.’

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘Mr Desai . . . Sanjib? Why would he tell you to locate me? Where’s your group leader?’ she enquired.

‘Forget our group leader; I don’t even have a group!’ he explained. ‘Half the kids in my school are too snobbish to bother themselves with any event that reaches beyond the Tropic of Cancer, and this trip was at Tamil Nadu—always a lost cause.’ He sighed visibly, but didn’t disclose his own elation at the fact that the other boys from school hadn’t accompanied him. He really didn’t fancy the idea of four burly boys from his class peering over his shoulder when he would try to make a pass at the cute girl from Ooty.

‘So . . . You’re all alone on this trip?’ she asked again, not knowing what to say next.

‘Well, yes. When I spoke to Sanjib sir regarding my situation, he was of the opinion that I should come regardless of my school team. He even offered to waive my workshop registration fees since the school isn’t officially participating.’

‘Classic Sanjib,’ Mitali said, casually running her fingers through her hair. ‘So, how do you plan on reaching Masinagudi?’

‘That’s the problem I’ve been facing—which is why I called up Sanjib sir this morning and he asked me to wait till your flight arrived so that I could meet you here. I was hoping I could hitch a ride with you and your group,’ he explained.

Mitali paused for a few minutes to consider her position on this. One thing was clear—she wouldn’t hear the end of it when she got back. The dean, although maintaining his official stance of non-competition with the Doon School, would still be furious to know that the prestigious school from Dehradun hadn’t even bothered to send a delegation. But tagging one of the enemy along was a big risk. On the other hand, it was Sanjib’s idea to have this boy escorted to the venue with them and it made no sense to turn down one of Sanjib’s ideas. Although Sanjib Desai never retaliated or had any backlash after being disagreed with, his ire had a subtle nature of resurfacing during delicate moments. And to Mitali, making the best use of this time was more important than worrying over petty rivalry.

‘Yeah, okay. You can come with us,’ she said, finally. ‘Here, let me introduce you to our team—those two right there,’ she said, pointing at the girls, ‘are Natasha and Shreya. And . . .’ her voice drifted off, as she failed to locate Yuvraj and Ananya within the range of her immediate eyesight. They still hadn’t returned from their shopping gimmick. Suddenly, without warning, Abhinav voluntarily picked up Mitali’s suitcase and started walking towards the two girls, one of whom seemed to be deeply engrossed in a book and the other appeared to be visibly disgruntled, looking around hungrily for a distraction other than her reading companion.

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘Hi. I’m Abhinav,’ he said as he stopped short of bumping into her and extended his hand. She didn’t take it.

‘And why should that be of any relevance to me?’ she countered, getting up from her seat and taking a step backwards. Shreya, too, noticing the sudden disturbance, had broken out of her Charles Dickens fantasy and looked up at the boy.

‘Relax, girls. This is Abhinav Gandhi; he studies at The Doon School for boys in Dehradun,’ Mitali intervened. ‘He will join us for the workshop; his team mates couldn’t make it here. So he’s all on his own. Be nice, Natasha,’ she said, adding the last sentence to ensure that Natasha Malhotra’s famous

ego didn't create trouble.

'Sure, ma'am! Hi Abhinav, I'm Natasha Malhotra,' Natasha said, extending her hand to Abhinav this time, who shook it, surprised at the sudden change in mannerisms. His instincts told him that the girl's viewpoint may have changed at the mention of his school's name. It had always been this way. Strangely, girls often found the idea of befriending a Doon School student quite appealing.

He wasn't too far off in his assumptions and by the time they started walking towards the exit gates, to try and locate the missing student couple, Natasha and Shreya were already talking about him.

'He's cute!' Shreya said, staring naughtily into Natasha's eyes. She was trying to suppress a giggle, which became evident by the unintended modulation in her voice.

'Well, I'm glad that something has managed to draw you out from your Dickens fever!' Natasha said, trying not to look directly at the new boy.

@BOOKHOUSE1

When Shreya said nothing, Natasha added on, 'And besides, he really isn't as tall as some of the other Doon Boys that I know!'

'Shut up! You don't know *any* other Doon Boys!' Shreya said, pinching her friend on the arm.

Natasha smiled back at her. 'Like I said, I'm happy that you're distracted.'

Abhinav was walking faster than any of them, and Mitali Roy too was surprised at the agility with which this seventeen-year old boy was carrying not just his own luggage, but her suitcase too, when the three of them still found it difficult to match pace with him.

'Stop!' she had to call out eventually, as Abhinav neared the airport exit. Abhinav stopped in his tracks to turn around.

'Hey you two!' she called out, as her gaze spotted Yuvraj and Ananya, sitting at a coffee shop table adjacent to the booking counters. Ananya, hearing her teacher's voice, looked up.

'Yuvraj, I really think we should go now. Mitali Ma'am must be very

angry,' she pleaded with her boyfriend.

'But I want to sit here and finish this coffee with my girl!' He smiled mischievously, twirling a tablespoon in his fingers.

'We're in Tamil Nadu! We'll find lots and lots of coffee and an airport really isn't my idea of a romantic date!' she complained. For the past half an hour, she had tried to explain this fact to Yuvraj, who seemed to have gone bonkers at his realization that the two of them were practically *on a vacation* together, away from their friends, away from the prying scrutiny of their parents, away from the blazingly fast rumour-prone walls of their school and the gossipmongers who inhabited the place. To be fair, they weren't *entirely* unsupervised, owing to the presence of Mitali Ma'am, but *still*.

He finally agreed to get up from the table, and escorted Ananya out of her chair himself. Thankfully, their teacher did not stretch the issue any further and they stepped out into the hot and humid Chennai weather, to wait for their ride.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Once they were outside, the four kids from Presidency and their teacher began looking for a shaded area to wait. However, the not-so-tall-Doon boy Abhinav became a bit shifty as his eyes began to gauge the area surrounding the airport for shops. An expert at behaviour analysis, Mitali Roy at once understood the reason why Abhinav was getting restless. She didn't say anything out loud; she decided it wasn't polite to point this out in front of his peers.

'Look, Abhinav, as much as I'd love to point out that smoking in your age is bad, not to mention illegal, I know it wouldn't have any effect on you. So let me just clear this for you right now—you will not, under any circumstances—mention cigarettes in front of my students. Next, you will *not* tempt any of my students into smoking. Lastly, you will not smoke in the presence of myself or my students. Is that clear?' she said, cornering him.

He was taken aback a bit, especially because he hadn't really expected to be confronted all of a sudden. But he soon regained his composure. Abhinav Gandhi had resorted to smoking as a result of the most common syndrome in the world—peer pressure. Again, there was no tragic story that drove his sentiments about the matter. He was merely someone who had been initiated into the habit by seniors at Doon, and had retained the same because he liked

it. And after waiting for four hours inside the airport premises, he was craving for a cigarette.

But he completely understood the reasons for Mitali Roy's ultimatum and saw no reason to object to the same.

She insisted again, as he didn't speak up at first.

'I asked you a question, Abhinav. You will *not* set an example for the students of my school on this subject. Is that *clear*?'

'Crystal,' he replied, curtly.

'You're excused,' Mitali continued, gesturing at him to let go of the backpack that he was carrying. He was relieved—this meant he could venture out and buy himself some cigarettes for the trip. As he went off looking for smokes, she returned to tend to her ensemble of students.

'Now I understand that *these* two,' she said, pointing at Natasha and Shreya, 'are probably in the habit of dieting to the point of anorexia, but the two of *you*, (she was looking in the direction of Yuvraj and Ananya now) don't seem like the dieting types. Aren't you hungry?'

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Well, yeah, kind of,' Yuvraj muttered, sheepishly. Never before in his life had he been escorted to a trip under female authority, so this air of concern came as a surprise to him.

'So why haven't you said anything? If any of you suffer from malnutrition or get dehydrated on this trip—*which*, going by Sanjib Desai's track record—is very likely to happen, your parents will show no mercy on me when we get back. So please, feel free to tell me when you feel like getting food or supplies. It's on the school's tab. And guys, you can stop calling me *ma'am*. It makes me feel like I'm a hundred years old! And another thing—try not to get too familiar with that guy from Doon, okay? I thought he was alright, but it turns out he has some issues himself. Understood?'

'Okay *ma'am,*' Ananya said, and then immediately corrected herself. 'I mean okay.'

Mitali smiled. This girl reminded her a bit of her own childhood, always measuring her words and playing them back in her head. She wondered why

none of the guys back in her time had been as caring as Yuvraj. *Ah, young love!*

An incident flew back to her head, and even as she tried to discard it from her thoughts—she couldn't.

He had never acted so strangely, not in the months' time during which she had known him. He always appeared to be the jovial, always smiling and perpetually respected mentor, and she considered herself to be his most prized pupil.

Crushes don't just develop over time, they are built over the foundation of basic trust. And as he made his way crashing through her door, she found the image of that trust breaking up right before her eyes.

'What happened, lady? I thought you loved me and all that shit,' he said, as he drew closer to her.

'Please, just leave!' she begged him, but his breath reeked of alcohol and he didn't look like he was in any mood to listen. She tried pushing him away with all her might, and it worked for a minute, but he returned to pin her against the wall.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She tried to grab a vase that lay next to her, with shaking hands and considered the possibility of smashing it on his head as the beast's hands played with her clothes . . .

Mitali discarded the thought with great pain, and turned to look at Abhinav who seemed to have found a shop to buy his cigarettes.

Natasha was getting bored again, mostly because Shreya, disappointingly—had returned to her irritating state of absent-mindedness as she flipped through the pages of her leather-bound mammoth of a novel. She let her thoughts swim around what Mitali had just said.

Abhinav had issues.

As much as Natasha loved to deny her own feeble insecurities to herself, deep down she was a girl and she wanted to know more about this boy. She would never admit this to Shreya, mostly because she loved maintaining her position of superiority, but Abhinav really didn't look that bad. She was correct about the height thing—he was a bit shorter than the guys whom she

usually saw in her dreams, but then again, not everyone was blessed with the looks of Yuvraj.

Abhinav had cropped his hair short, not a strand extending on to his forehead. His complexion was bordering on wheatish, and he didn't have a single pock mark on his face like most of the other boys of his age. He seemed perfect, and the only question mark on his perfection was the comment their teacher had made—*Try not to get too familiar*. Natasha simply *had* to know him better now.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Chapter Six

The Ride

@BOOKHOUSE1

The airport cabbie (there really wasn't any other word to describe him) was nondescript; he seemed to perpetually suffer from the depressive dilemma of driving around a luxury SUV without the freedom of taking it wherever he wanted. And right now, he was answerable to a young woman—this did nothing to boost his ego.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Thankfully, Mitali Roy wasn't a person who liked bossing people around. The six passengers had been seated quite comfortably inside the vehicle. She handed the cabbie a slip containing details of their destination, and he drove in silence, once everyone was settled in.

Mitali Roy took the navigator seat herself, thereby saving the students from a silent squabble over who gets to ride shotgun. She carried in her hand a few things from the package which Sanjib Desai had mailed: The map of the estate, a set of directions about arriving at the venue, and a guidebook to the rainforests of Tamil Nadu which she had picked up at the airport. She was busy browsing through the details present in the handbook, and decidedly missed out on most details of whatever view of Chennai outskirts was visible through the glass window.

In the seat immediately behind the driver, Natasha and Shreya had taken window seats—with Abhinav sitting between them. Shreya had insisted on the window seat so that she could read in peace. Natasha had agreed to the arrangement because this meant she could try and steal glances at Abhinav, or maybe brush up against him a little bit. Yuvraj and Ananya were seated at

the back, in seats facing each other. Most of the luggage was also present in the back seat, which gave the two of them little legroom to wiggle around.

The first twenty-odd minutes of the journey were spent coursing through city-traffic over the bypass, and nothing outside was remotely interesting—Natasha spotted a biscuit factory and a school for physically challenged students, as the only notable buildings. Once or twice, she felt Abhinav's shoulder nudging against hers—but eventually discarded them by crediting the bumpy roads.

'THANK YOU FOR VISITING CHENNAI – COME AGAIN' was written in huge white block letters on a green board at the end of the bypass. They were now moving out of the city limits, and a more rural picture of Tamil Nadu came into view.

'How much time will it take for us to reach Singara?' Mitali asked the driver.

'Three hours,' came the reply.

@BOOKHOUSE1

The awe-inspiring part of the ride did not begin till about thirty more minutes, during which Natasha had almost dozed off again, getting bored at the poorly built shacks that lined the road. She had contemplated the possibility of initiating a conversation with Abhinav in the meantime, but had swayed unconvincingly at the idea rapidly. Every time she would clear her throat to speak up, there would either be a road bump or a sudden thought in her own head which made her quit the idea of talking at all. Behind them, Yuvraj and Ananya steadily looked out through the window in the back, trying to take in the view of a landscape that looked like it was running away from them.

'Leave it all behind,' Yuvraj said suddenly, breaking Ananya out of her trance.

'What?' she asked him.

'It was the name of an album by U2—one of my favourites,' he explained, and then continued, 'most of our lives can become simpler if we can just leave our troubles and our past behind us, like this road that we're leaving behind every minute!'

‘And since when did my boyfriend become a *philosopher*?’ she asked, holding his hand.

‘Since I met *you*,’ he responded.

Ananya had since long thought about the idea of talking about the stagnancy in their relationship which often troubled her. But staying within the confines of their homes in Delhi, under the nose of their parents—they hardly got any moments to talk about it. Free time in school was always spent trying to find interstices where they could maybe steal a kiss or exchange a small note complimenting the other. But there was this weird craving inside her head all the time, which wanted to break out and grab more of Yuvraj. She wondered if he felt the same. She didn’t want to distract him from his ambitions—she knew that he was extremely edgy about preparing for his entrance tests, but she was also scared that they might not ever get the time to appreciate the time whilst they were in love.

In a few months’ time, when school would be over, Yuvraj would travel to some distant part of the country for college and she, Ananya, would go down a totally different path—for she wanted to become a teacher. They would only get time to meet on vacations, to talk and reminisce about the times which they could have had for themselves. Their relationship would get reduced to a long-distance tale of misery. It made her sad to think about such things, but as their time in school drew nearer to a halt, she found herself constantly rummaging through her brain for answers to these questions.

@BOOKHOUSE1

In the awkward silence inside that vehicle, she tried hard to figure out a way of letting Yuvraj know about all of those feelings at once, without scaring him out of his wits. She cursed the fact that time only stands still in movies and songs and works of art. Life just roars ahead, and all that you can do is ‘leave it all behind.’

Maybe not.

Yuvraj tried hard to decipher the sadness in Ananya’s eyes, as he almost always did, wondering why she was drowned in such unspoken morbidity in the midst of a happy time. This trip was something she was surely looking forward to, wasn’t it?

‘Hey,’ he said, running his fingers through her hair and stroking her

cheek lightly. That made her look up at him.

'Yes?'

'I love you,' he said, and smiled at her. He had said the words at least a hundred times earlier, and in the hurried conversations back at school it seemed more like a courtesy to acknowledge his feelings for her—but here, with the time they had upon themselves, it seemed to him that his own words were triggered by a million emotions.

She closed her eyes and kissed the hand which was resting on her cheek. She then moved her own hand to hold his fingers to her lips and kissed them again. It felt new, the whole sensation. Ananya's lips felt icy cold against the skin of his fingers, and he had a sudden urge, wishing they were alone and not in the company of all these other people in the car.

For the rest of the journey, Yuvraj held her hand, caressing her thin palm with his fingers.

@BOOKHOUSE1

By about six in the evening, the car had veered out of the outer city and they were now entering forest territory. The view of villagers by the side of the road was changing into expansive thickets of bushes and trees. Also, the road seemed to go up a slope, and they realized that they were gaining altitude, just as the driver stepped down on the accelerator and the car sped up. Ten minutes into it, Abhinav realized what Urvashi had been talking about their chat earlier. Growing up in Gujarat and then being confined to the boundaries of a boarding school, Abhinav had only seen a few shades which could truly be called *green*. In the rainforest, however, it was a drastic change. The sheer amount of leaves and twigs and branches that brushed against the vehicle seemed to challenge his fundamental knowledge of colours. There were at least a million different variants of green shades all around the car. And the almost non-existent, dimming sunlight bounced off the glossy surface of the forest leaves, entangling itself in other shades. There was a slow overturn of surrounding noises, the humdrum of city life and the subsequent sounds of cattle were eventually replaced by the tingling sounds that crickets made.

Natasha had finally drawn up the courage to talk to Abhinav, when he suddenly pointed his finger in the direction of the window where Natasha was sitting, and asked her to lower the glass pane. She obliged, unnerved by

the gesture.

‘Look!’ he said, and she peered out of the window, her gaze following the direction of his hands.

There was a rabbit pacing on the branch of a tree, trying to chase another one. Its eyes glowed in the darkness.

‘Do you like rabbits?’ Natasha finally asked him. It seemed like a good question to begin a conversation with.

‘We had a pet rabbit back at home, when I was a kid. My elder sister played with him mostly, but I had to say goodbye to him when I was sent to my first boarding school.’

‘Aww . . . That’s so cute! How old were you?’ she asked, looking at him.

‘I must’ve been about nine years old back then, I got sent off to an army boarding school in Nagpur. It was horrible.’

‘Did you go back? How did you end up at Doon?’ she asked.

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘Well, I didn’t go back as I was thrown out’, he said, sheepishly. ‘It was tough there; they made us get up at six in the morning every day and if anyone was late, they’d make him stand out in the sun till noon with a bag on his shoulder. I had been subject to that specific punishment at least thrice.’

‘Ooh, that sounds rough. And what happened after that? How did you get thrown out?’

‘Kids have a tendency of toughening up when placed in hard situations. It was every man for himself. One day, in an argument after classes, I went overboard and hit another kid in the head with a rock. There was blood and the kid fainted, my parents were summoned they were asked to take me away voluntarily, else I’d get expelled.’

‘So you were a hard kid to bring up!’

‘Not in the least. That whole rock-hitting incident had been the negative highlight of my life as a child. After that, I came back home and for three years, I was with my books, never got into fights and never bothered anyone. I didn’t find anyone worth talking to, back at home.’

‘What about your sister—the one who used to play with the rabbit?’

‘Oh, I don’t wanna talk about it. My family got her married to some hotel-chain-heir-apparent the minute she turned eighteen. I tried talking to them about it, but they wouldn’t listen to me anyway. And after a while, she stopped calling me from her in-laws’ place. I got sick of it all and wanted to run away. Doon was almost a blessing, in that sense. My dad’s false sense of ego made him chase up the admissions office and before I knew it, I was breathing and living with some of the most pretentious douchebags I had ever known.’

She laughed a little, and then asked him, ‘So how’s it like at Doon these days?’

‘It’s alright, the whole boys only thing *sucks*, by the way!’ he said, smiling. As he said the words, his hand touched hers, and she enjoyed the subtle flirting.

Bam.

@BOOKHOUSE1

A big bump on the road woke two people up at once, and the others jumped up in their seats. Mitali Roy, who had closed her eyes for a nap in the front seat immediately sat up straight and looked angrily at the driver, who shrugged.

On the other side of Abhinav, there was Shreya, she had dozed off the minute when the sunlight had dimmed. She still had one finger acting as a bookmark, and she was resting her head on the closed jacket of the book. At the bump on the road, her head moved sideways and hit the inner handle of the door slightly. That woke her up.

‘What *was* that?’ Mitali asked the driver, since her angry look had evoked no response.

‘We’re getting closer to Singara, *madam*,’ the driver said, his eyes steady on the road.

Mitali sighed. Sanjib had definitely chosen one hell of a place to organize the workshop.

Behind her, Abhinav and Natasha were enjoying their conversation. What Abhinav didn’t tell her, of course, was the fact that he had never been good at

talking to girls. He was telling her about life at Doon, the small nuances between tall students and short statured teachers, which made her laugh even more. But he completely skipped the part about meeting Urvashi online and getting interested in her.

'Enough about me; tell me about yourself!' he insisted.

'What's there to know?' Natasha said, her perfect white teeth visible through her smile. 'I study at The Presidency Convent, which you must know by now. I used to be the Head Girl at school . . .' and then she stopped, realizing that it would be weird to talk about it—especially since she was still trying to recover from those very same blows.

'What?' he asked, sensing an awkward pause.

'Nothing, can we talk about something else?' she said, shifting uneasily.

'Well, sure! What about your friends? Who's your bestie? What's your favourite colour? Forget that—who's your favourite movie star? What kind of cuisine do you like?' He was trying to change the topic. It worked, her smile returned.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'I can swear that all of that sounds like flirting!' She giggled as she spoke. 'But I guess we have a lot of time to discuss all of this. Hey, can I tell you a secret?'

'Sure!'

'I didn't really sign up for this trip because I like *photography*!'

'You're kidding! Neither did I,' he blurted out, and immediately realized that disclosing his reasons for joining the trip probably wouldn't go down well with the pretty girl next to him, as he hadn't told her about his online crush yet.

'So why did you . . .?' she began, but he cut her off, with a stroke of luck, he had spotted another rabbit in the forest, and he pointed it out to her.

'Let's see your camera!' he said quickly, to avoid discussing the last question on her mind as soon as her gaze returned from the exteriors.

She rummaged through her luggage to wield her entry level Canon DX100 and showed it to him. It was totally unused; she had never dabbled in

photography. She however felt a bit relieved that her subtle nemesis Ananya owned a pathetic point-and-shoot.

He fiddled around with the gadget for some time, pretending to be interested in the little details. Shortly thereafter, a signboard on the road told them that they had reached Singara. The driver hit the brakes softly, in an attempt to make up for the bumpy ride, and pulled over to the side of the road.

'My car can't go beyond this point!' he declared, as he looked at Mitali, as if expecting to be reprimanded for making such a statement.

'I know, relax. We're expecting an escort vehicle. Let's get down, kids!' she shouted out loud enough for the students in the back to register.

They complied almost instantly. Shreya had to be woken up again, and she groaned underneath her breath upon learning of the layover.

They got down on the side of the road and after Mitali had paid off the driver, he backed his vehicle. It was pitch dark, except for some fence lights that lit up a scarce part of the road near the physical Checkpost. There was a constant sound of running water nearby. Abhinav had read about this, too, there was a small stream about fifty meters south of where they were standing, and tourist reports had indicated that leopards in the region often gathered at night to drink water from it. The thought of being stranded without protective gear in the middle of the road in a group of six people, four of whom were women, did not give him any comfort. But he kept his fears to himself. With the sudden onset of fear, he began to realize Urvashi's online statement in even better clarity.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Ananya was tired from the trip now, and she leaned on Yuvraj's shoulder to seek support. Unseen by the rest of the group, Yuvraj slid his hand around her waist, sending another unknown probe into Ananya's head. More than she had realized earlier, this trip was turning out to be a fun experience; they couldn't have done this back at school in a million years!

'Darn! My cell phone isn't registering any signals. Is any of you carrying a phone?' Mitali looked at the students in exasperation—she wanted to call Sanjib Desai to check if the escort vehicles had been scheduled to arrive on time.

At first, all the Presidency students shook their heads. A little surprised at this, Abhinav reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. As Mitali accepted it from him—she looked at the screen and her face dropped.

'Nope, your phone's no good either!' she said. 'Anyone else?'

There was still no response from the others. In reality, all of them were carrying phones, even Ananya was carrying her mother's cellphone. School rules didn't allow them to keep one, though, and all of them had at one time or the other, been subject to the humiliation of having their cell phone confiscated.

Sensing their reluctance, Mitali spoke up again.

'Relax, you kids! I'm not going to report you to the principal. And besides, this is an offsite workshop! It'd be stupid not to carry a phone. Now who wants to help me out?'

At her insistence, Yuvraj gave her his phone and took a step back.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Oh great. Your device seems to show some promise of getting us out of trouble, young man!' she said, and smiled at him. He returned the smile. Ananya was secretly proud that in the smallest way, *her* boyfriend had saved the day.

But just as Mitali was about to dial, blazing lights hit her eyes and she was taken aback for a moment. This was followed by an uproar of engines. As she looked in the direction of the Checkpost, she saw the brief outline of a vehicle speeding towards them. It had four headlights on the front.

Abhinav looked at the vehicle and recognized it immediately; it was a first edition Gypsy, and searchlights had been installed at the front to assist in night safaris. He was pleased; the thrill factor had just gone up one notch for him.

This time, he sped towards the vehicle carrying two bags in his hands, his own, and the one that belonged to Natasha in an attempt to impress her. He then hopped on to the navigator seat. The others joined him behind, and the new driver asked them to ensure that they held on tight. He looked sideways at Abhinav and asked him to put his seat belt on.

Once everybody was seated, the driver broveck the vehicle sideways and

turned around to face the Checkpost. The road ahead was pretty clear and not very different from the road that they had taken so far. Abhinav looked ahead and wondered why there was a regulation to use certified 4×4 vehicles.

His question was answered almost immediately as he thought of it; the driver without warning, swerved the vehicle and turned it right into the thicket of the forest, freaking almost everyone out.

'Hey! What do you think you're doing?' he shouted at the driver. The driver shouted back' who replied,

'JUST HOLD ON TIGHT. I'M TAKING YOU TO THE ESTATE.'

Then it dawned on him. The Masinagudi estate wasn't *near* the forest. It was *inside* the forest.

The jeep showed no signs of slowing down, even as the thicket of bushes surrounding the vehicle seemed to grow wilder, and the narrow strip of *road* on which they were driving, became narrower and almost invisible at times.

'ARE YOU SURE THIS IS THE RIGHT PATH?' Abhinav bellowed at the driver, over the loud din of the roaring engine.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'ABSOLUTELY. THIS IS MY REGULAR DRIVEWAY!' the driver shouted back, without taking his eyes from the road.

Behind them, Mitali Roy was cursing Sanjib silently, for having chosen this place. But she told herself that nothing lesser than this could have been expected from Sanjib. She did the only thing which was plausible; she tried to make sure that her students were unharmed.

Shreya was holding on to a steel handle like the mast of a ship about to sink. Natasha was sitting tight with her eyes closed, and Ananya had pressed her head into Yuvraj's chest in fear.

Mitali stroked the back of Shreya's head with one hand, the other hand grabbing her own seat tightly. Shreya was whimpering.

'Calm down, Shreya. It's going to be fine, OW!' she screamed, as a stone flew out of nowhere and hit her squarely on the shoulder.

'STAY LOW!' the driver advised, over the sound of the engine. 'There may be a chase in progress.'

‘Chase? What chase?’ Abhinav questioned him, but Shreya saw it first.

‘Is that . . . Oh my god, is that a rhino?’ She was looking at a moving figure that was running very close to the rear of the vehicle. It looked a lot like an overgrown cat, except it had a horn sticking out of its head. Soon, it was joined by another member of its species, and then more came into view. Now, it’s probably impossible to tell when a Rhino is happy or when it’s pissed, but judging by the way they were running behind the vehicle, it didn’t seem like they enjoyed the vehicular disturbance in the midst of *their* jungle.

Natasha opened her eyes to look at the animals pacing up, and then immediately felt a jerk beneath herself as the vehicle sped up.

‘ARE YOU CRAZY? SLOW DOWN! I THINK I’M GOING TO PUKE!’ Abhinav screamed at the driver again, as he continued to speed up the vehicle. This time, the driver actually turned to look at him and Abhinav was suddenly very scared. The man had just one eye and it was glaring at him.

‘You know how I lost one eye, son?’ he asked solemnly.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Abhinav shook his head in response, unable to utter any sounds out of his mouth.

‘Because there was a time not too long ago when I was driving through these very roads, and I happened to slow down.’

He continued racing the vehicle ahead, swerving with remarkable precision at times, as if he knew the route like the back of his hand. At one point, Abhinav could have sworn that he saw the driver blink and turn the steering wheel at the same time. For a man with one eye, he was a damn good driver.

They approached a patch of road which was almost at a forty five degree angle from ground surface, and as Abhinav grimaced himself for the possibility of the vehicle turning over, the driver slowed down.

‘Okay, I’m confused now. I take it that you don’t intend for us to get trampled by running rhinos. Why are you slowing down?’ he asked the driver, with a decided amount of politeness in his voice.

‘Well,’ the driver replied, smiling, ‘if you look behind you, you will spot

the fence line. There's just one point for entry and exit, and we're inside it now. The fence is electrocuted.'

Abhinav craned his neck out to look back. Sure as hell, there was a thin zigzag of barbed wires running across the landscape as far as his vision went. He wondered how he had missed it.

'Welcome to Masinagudi,' the driver said, slowing the vehicle down to regular driving standards. Abhinav looked ahead again, as the thicket of trees and bushes began clearing out in front of them. Human architectural intervention became obvious soon after, a lot of trees had been chopped off to make an entry point for vehicles. At a distance, he could spot something that resembled a speck of light. As the vehicle reared closer to the speck, it grew and came into is vision, it was a Victorian-era cottage, with three flame torches at its gate.

The driver finally hit the brakes as the vehicle stood in front of the gate.

'Is this where we'll be staying?' Mitali asked, as they hopped down from the vehicle.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'No. Your cottage is a little ahead, down the road,' the driver said, pointing his finger in the direction of further darkness. 'This is another cottage. Someone wants to meet all of you.'

'Oh,' Mitali said, and gestured at the students to leave their luggage on the vehicle, seeing as a couple of them were about to lug their backpacks on their shoulders. They put it back, and followed Mitali through the gate as she walked in.

The door creaked a little as she nudged it open; it was damp, probably from the years of rainfall outside. The interiors looked stunning; there was absolutely no way to guess that this cottage was so big, it appeared a lot more scaled down when viewed from the outside. There was a small circular stairway right after the entry door which probably led up to the roof of the cottage. What was interesting, though, was the fact that the staircase had been built around a giant tree. In fact, as they moved ahead from the tree-staircase, it became clear to them that the whole cottage was built around the tree.

Abhinav had taken the lead to walk into what could only be described as the living space in the cottage, like the exteriors; the inner walls reeked of a

Victorian presence as well. The colour of paint was a muddy shade of brown—and argon lamps scattered through the ceilings lit up the place in a yellowish-brown ambience.

There was a coffee table right in the middle of the room. As Abhinav walked into that space, he spotted the girl he had seen so many times on Facebook, except it wasn't really her. Instead of her regular attire comprising of unbelievably long *kurtis* or Salwar suits, she was dressed in a halter top and navy blue hipsters that ended just above her knee. Her hair wasn't plaited like her pictures either; it flowed freely from the back of her head, teasing her shoulders and making them look all-the-more inviting. It took Abhinav thirty seconds to realize that he was gaping at her, before he managed to speak up.

'Hi! You must be . . .'

'Urvashi. I'm Urvashi Nambiar,' she said, extending her hand, and went on, 'the madman is in the kitchen.'

'Umm . . . Excuse me?' he asked, unable to comprehend the meaning of her words.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Behind Abhinav, the rest of the group too had walked into the cottage. Shreya, Natasha, Yuvraj and Ananya were busy admiring the internal architecture of the cottage, and Mitali had walked over to the coffee-table to feel the surface of the mahogany that it was made of. A booming male voice made her stand back up.

'Yes, back in the day, those Brits really knew how to live!'

Abhinav moved his head to look at the man who had just uttered the words. He had appeared out of a hallway that led into the living room. He looked strangely familiar—yet it was very hard to confirm if this was the same man that he had seen in the Wikipedia pictures. Up front, he looked a lot younger, and sported a long tuft of slightly greying hair which was tied behind his ears in a slick ponytail. He was wearing a polka-dotted Hawaiian shirt matched with grey shorts that could have easily been stylized boxers, but the air with which he paced through the room gave away that the impression that he owned the place. Abhinav noticed that the man was carrying a large glass tumbler in his hand, half-full of pale yellow fluid. The stagger in his legs gave away his drunkenness; Abhinav had witnessed this

stagger many times with his own father and uncles back at home, he *hated* it.

'Ah. I wasn't hoping to run into you tonight!' Mitali said, as she turned to look at him.

'Oh, but I need you to escort *this* little midget with you on your way to the cottage,' he said, gesturing with his hands towards Urvashi, trying to cut down his voice to a whisper in a failed attempt. It looked comical. Abhinav tried not to laugh.

'Are you out of your mind? You're drinking in the presence of a minor! You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Sanjib!' Mitali said, trying to conceal her anger by suppressing her own voice. She was speaking through gritted teeth, and whenever she had to resort to such contortion of her face, her temper always went through the roof. It was happening right now, as she witnessed the man drowned in scotch attempt to come up with an excuse for his behaviour.

'Oh no, she's pretty cool. You know, she turned up this evening in a totally stuck up dress, it was some traditional South Indian saree or whatever, and the first thing she did was to run into the washroom and change into those god awful clothes. I don't think she's the type who minds alcohol too much.'

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Jeez, Sanjib! With you it's never simple, is it? It isn't about her perception of your drunkenness, it's a matter of principle! You're setting up a bad example.'

This time, she had uttered his name loud enough for the other students to hear.

'Wait,' Yuvraj said, as he saw the man a lot more clearly now. 'Isn't that . . .?'

'. . . yup. That's Sanjib Desai.' Natasha finished the sentence for him.

'The *Madman,*' Urvashi said in a whisper, and giggled softly.

Chapter Seven

The Madman

@BOOKHOUSE1

Sanjib Desai always stuck to his habit of getting up early in the morning, mostly to the surprise of those who worked with him. Hangovers weren't really his thing, and he preferred sticking to schedules and plans. He took exactly five minutes to shave off the unruly stubble and twenty minutes to carefully chew and gulp his breakfast with his morning coffee, before attending to the matters of the day.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'. . . *Irresponsible* . . . *Illegal* . . .' Keywords from Mitali's accusation rung hard in his ears as he tried to drown out her voice from his ears.

He had blanked out images of his past with her—the torrid time when he had been so sure that she *wanted* him, but the turn of events had been depressing.

'She's going to try and make you apologize,' said one voice in his head.

'Well, we're not going to let that happen now, are we?' said another, a more prominent voice. This one was sinister and had an imperative tone. Unlike Urvashi, Sanjib Desai was pretty sure that he was schizophrenic. But he prided himself for that knowledge. Anything that set him apart from the rest of the wretched world was good enough for him.

He picked out his uniform for the day —a camouflage jacket and matching pants, and counted out the remaining five pieces before zipping them up in a bag. And then, in his usual stride—he started walking towards the door of his cottage.

The next morning, everyone was surprised at how early their teacher had woken up, considering the events from the previous night. It wasn't just the trip or the unnerving encounter with Mr Desai or the comfortable beds that had been waiting for them in their cottage; the overall incredulity of the situation had all of them reeling with nightmares through the night.

Their cottage was identical to the one in which the veteran photographer had been put up; theirs too had a staircase built around a tree. The driver, who disclosed himself to be a full time employee of Mr Desai and more of a concierge at the estate, had explained that all of the cottages were built around the time of the British Raj, and were used as lodging houses for the English overlords who presided over this territory about seven decades back. The coffee plantations had moved into private hands about ten years back, and since then the ownership of the estate had changed hands rapidly.

Until a few years back, the property was owned by a prominent Bollywood figure, who adored it for the sheer privacy. After him, it was a Bollywood producer who bought it and had tried to convert it into a resort. The location and the obvious difficulty of being surrounded by a forest didn't allow the project to take off, and eventually, it had come up on the property market once again. At this point, Sanjib Desai had swooped in, having been informed of this place's existence by a model who had worked closely with both of its previous owners.

@BOOKHOUSE1

The three bedrooms of the cottage were as dimly lit as the living space, and the argon lighting constantly gave the effect of having a fireplace. There were king sized beds in all three rooms, Natasha, Shreya and Mitali Roy took the master bedroom, whilst the other two were divided among Yuvraj-Abhinav and Ananya-Urvashi. The division of rooms was done under the supervision of Mitali. Had Yuvraj known Abhinav well enough to understand that he too had a thing for the girl sleeping next to his own girlfriend, he would've asked for an option to trade places with Urvashi.

Urvashi hadn't slept at all that night, she kept thinking about the time when she had caught Abhinav gaping at her back in the other cottage, and it made her blush to realize that her drastic change in clothing had brought about exactly the effect which she had desired. But her lack of sleep made it very difficult for her to get up, and she was rubbing her eyes by the time Mitali had woken everyone up.

‘So,’ Mitali began addressing the group of students once everyone was settled together for breakfast.

‘It seems like The Presidency people were the *only* school who thought it was necessary to send a teacher, or more than a single student, for that matter.’

She was looking at Urvashi, as if expecting an explanation.

‘Well, I’m from Good Shepherd International School in Ooty, and I was the only student in the class who was interested in the workshop by Mr Desai, which is why I was asked to prepare for the trip alone.’

The earnestness of her voice made Mitali remember her own childhood for a second. She, too, had been a free thinker in her days, and fondly recalled the times when her parents had to chase her around to stop her from taking up tasks that little girl weren’t thought to be capable of doing.

‘Okay, so it looks like I’m the only adult in this group. Here’s how it’s going to play out. We need to stick together, because the man behind this project, well, you all know what he’s capable of. I’m sure you understand that by his choice of venue.’

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘Excuse me, but isn’t Mr Desai going to join us for breakfast?’ Yuvraj enquired, as he loaded his plate with the *upma* that had been served.

‘Well, I seriously doubt it. I believe he is still recovering from his hangover as we speak.’

‘Wrong,’ the same booming male voice spoke up again; this time it came from the door of the cottage. All the heads, including Mitali’s, turned to look at him. He was no longer wearing the ridiculous ensemble of clothing from last night; instead, he was clad in a green camouflage track suit, complete with a cap and binoculars that hung around his neck. He was carrying a large bag in his hand.

‘These are your uniforms,’ he said, dropping the bag on the floor with a *thud*.

‘My name is Sanjib Desai. You might think that you’ve already met me, but I would urge you not to make any such assumptions. What you saw last night was merely the image of a man trying to celebrate his latest

acquisition.'

Looking at Mitali's raised eyebrows, he continued, 'Yes, as of yesterday morning, I own and govern this Masinagudi estate.'

His words drew a blank on all the surrounding faces once again, and he went on.

'There aren't too many things that you have learnt or heard about me, and I would rather have it stay that way. You are not here to learn about me, you are here . . .'

'. . . to learn about photography.' Mitali finished the sentence under her own breath. She remembered this lecture from the last Sanjib Desai workshop which she had undergone as a student.

Sanjib was still speaking.

'. . . and you are most certainly not at liberty to ask me any personal questions *or* explanations about my choice of venue. I expect you to understand that my choices in this regard are completely irrefutable and unquestionable. Understood?'

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Yes sir.' Abhinav was the first one to respond, and looking at him, the others followed suit.

'I want to clear the air about another thing though.' He was pointing at Mitali now. 'Your teacher here believes that she still stands a chance at making it big in photography. I regret to admit this to you, but she was one of my failures as a teacher. That woman wouldn't know how to distinguish between a prime lens and a wide-angle scope if it stared her in the face.'

At the last statement, only Yuvraj and Urvashi seemed to nod along.

'Good. This tells me that at least two of you know what you're doing. As for the rest of you, don't be alarmed. I know how school workshops work. You probably didn't know what you signed up for, and why you signed up for it in the first place. So if anyone finds my routine disturbing or boring, you're welcome to wait in the cottage for the duration of your stay here; and I assure you that you will receive the best of my staff's hospitality. And that reminds me—Rocky didn't give you any trouble last night, did he?' He asked the question with a rude imitation of a one-eyed man, cupping one of his eyes

with his palm.

They recognized Rocky as the driver-cum-concierge, and shook their heads.

Natasha spoke up. ‘No sir, no trouble at all. He was great!’

Mitali had had enough of it.

‘*Mister* Desai. First, you conjured the hallucination of a lucrative photo workshop in the middle of the freaking jungle. *Then*, you lured students from three of the best schools in the country into joining it. You sent a raving lunatic to drive us through a rhino trail. And now, you’ve managed to insult me right in front of my students! How dare you!’ She began walking up to him, but he raised his hands to make her stop in her tracks.

‘Wrong on all allegations! First, I didn’t *lure* anybody, I just posted about the workshop, and both of these students (he was pointing at Urvashi and Abhinav) got interested on their own and contacted me. Next, as far as you’re concerned, you brought along this parade of students as an excuse to come here and meet me, thereby gaining the consequent responsibility of *any* misery that they may have gone through. That rhino trail you just mentioned, is the only way to get here, and Rocky is the best driver I’ve seen in my entire life. Now, about me insulting you, that really isn’t necessary. Your presence *here*,’ he gestured, spreading his hands in an all-sweeping motion, ‘is an insult to your intellect anyway.’

@BOOKHOUSE1

Mitali kept quiet, trying her best not to cry.

‘What was I saying? Ah, yes. Those of you who do not heartily wish to be a part of my expedition are free to remain in the safe environs of this cottage. There’s a phone at that end (he pointed to a corner of the room) which will be available for you to call Rocky anytime. He will bring you food and supplies as and when you see fit. And don’t worry about me, I will sign all the participation certificates with equal enthusiasm, irrespective of whether you choose to participate or not. Any questions?’ he asked, looming over the awestruck faces of the students.

‘I have one,’ Mitali said, raising her hand in mock respect. ‘Unless I’m mistaken, *you’ve* got just five camouflage uniforms in that bag, and you’re trying to cover up for your misgivings by giving the kids an opportunity to

stay at the cottage so that you look like the good guy, isn't it?' She stopped to take a breath, which Sanjib Desai mistook to be a pause and tried to explain himself by clearing his throat, but Mitali didn't allow him to speak. 'Well, I don't care about your tactics any way, and all my students are going to participate. Ask the other school kids to stay back on your one-eyed driver's watch. I promised my students a workshop and they're going to get one. Sorry, you two,' she said, turning her head towards Urvashi and Abhinav. Urvashi looked crestfallen; Abhinav didn't really give a damn, if he wouldn't get allowed to venture into the woods, his only regret would be the lost chance to flaunt his new camera.

'Be that as it may,' Sanjib spoke up, 'I absolutely cannot have kids running around this jungle without camouflage jackets. I cannot jeopardize their lives, trying to cater to your whims, Mitali. If you remember well, I've done it once and I regret it deeply till date.'

That shut Mitali up for good once again. She was helpless as she looked at her students; this was slowly turning into a really bad experience as far as the whole learning edge was concerned.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Umm . . . Mitali?' Ananya spoke up this time, stopping herself short of uttering the word *ma'am* to make her teacher a bit more comfortable.

'Yes, dear?' she asked, almost in sobs now.

'I think I'll pass on the trip, I'd rather stay in the cottage and get some rest; it has been a really tiring trip. And maybe Shreya can stay here with me. She's been meaning to finish her book.'

Mitali and Shreya spoke up in unison to reply.

'Are you sure?' Mitali asked, and Shreya screamed almost instantly, 'No way!'

Everyone turned to look at Shreya.

'What?' she looked offended. 'Look, I may not have expressed a lot of *interest* in our trip to this god forsaken place, but I didn't sign up because I wanted to enjoy a bumpy ride full of driving over stones and moving through hedges. I want to learn how to use *this*!' And she wielded her camera, an Olympus L890. It was an older model, and it immediately caught Sanjib

Desai's attention.

'Is that what I think it is? Oh my! May I . . .?' He extended his hand, and Shreya was flattered beyond words as she handed it over to him.

As Sanjib and Shreya began discussing the vintage device and admiring its capabilities, Yuvraj took Ananya to one side of the room.

'What are you doing, baby? You don't want to miss this chance now, do you? After all the pain we took on that trip, we're finally here now and . . .'

'Yuvraj, I don't think I want to learn anything from a man who treats women the way he did. Didn't you hear what he told Mitali ma'am?'

'I know . . .' he began, but Ananya put her finger on his lips to quieten him, and said 'Shh . . . Not another word. You go on, I know how much you've looked forward to this. I'll be fine. I'll watch TV or something.'

Yuvraj was too flabbergasted to speak, mostly because he felt the same sensation as he had felt when he had touched her lips in the back seat the other day. He regained his senses only when Ananya had withdrawn her hand, and Mitali ma'am had pulled the kids in a huddle to discuss who would go and who would stay back.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'I'll stay,' Yuvraj said, surprising everyone.

'What? But you're the one who convinced me that the trip was worth taking!' Mitali countered. 'You *idolize* that man!'

'I love his *work*, there's a difference. Now, I understand that you have some agenda of your own behind the trip, and I don't have a problem with that. But I think I'll pass on the expedition too.'

'Are you su . . .?' Mitali wanted to ask him, but Yuvraj assured her that he had thought it over.

'Alright then. You heard him. Yuvraj and Ananya will stay back. The rest of you, get changed fast!' she ordered, picking out her own camouflage jacket and track pants from the bag. The others followed suit. Sanjib Desai appeared to be relieved that the kid with the Olympus vintage camera was going to be a part of the workshop.

'Off you go, get ready' he said, and added, 'don't carry too much in your

backpack, just the essentials. I'd keep an antiseptic cream handy if I were you. We wouldn't want you to bruise on that peachy complexion now, would we?' He winked at Shreya, who was all the more flattered and rushed to grab her uniform.

Natasha and Mitali went to one bedroom to get dressed, as Shreya, Urvashi and Abhinav occupied the three restrooms in the cottage to change into their forest-worthy attire.

'You don't look like your age at all,' Natasha made an observation as Mitali took her top off to wear the khaki T-shirt from the ensemble.

'Thanks,' Mitali smiled a little and turned the other side, suddenly conscious about herself. 'You're quite pretty, too, I wish I was half as cute as you are, when I was your age.'

Natasha thanked her as she hurriedly drew her T-shirt on and pulled up the leaf-and-twig patterned track pants.

'These look baggy,' she complained as she looked at herself in the dressing table mirror.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Tell me about it.' Mitali joined her by her side, adjusting the creases on her jacket.

'Are they really necessary? I mean, what's the worst thing that could happen? Natasha asked, with a well-disguised note of concern in her voice.

'You never know,' Mitali responded. 'With Sanjib Desai, you can never be sure what he's up to. That reminds me. I saw your friend Shreya mingling with him a bit too fondly. I'd ask her to be careful, if I were you.'

'Like you asked me to be careful of Abhinav? He seems like a nice guy!' she said, and immediately wished that she hadn't, because the look in her teacher's eyes had quickly changed thereafter.

'I'm sorry, Mitali.' She too, stopped herself from saying *ma'am*. If Ananya could do it, *why not*? 'I sensed that there's something seriously messed up between you and that Sanjib guy, how bad is it?'

'Natasha, all men aren't the same. And there are some things that you wouldn't understand at your age.' Mitali got back to adjusting her creases.

‘Oh *please*, not with the age thing again. Tell me something, if grown-ups never talk to us about everything that they think we ought to understand, how will we ever learn? I will be eighteen in a few months, and I’ve always been a quick learner,’ Natasha said, and she meant it.

‘Okay, you asked for it. Back when I was in college, I had an innocent crush on Sanjib, nothing serious. So when I signed up for his workshop, I used to hang around him most of the time, pretending to take notes. At first, I thought he hadn’t noticed it. But three days before the course was supposed to end, he turned up in my dorm room, clad in those very same boxers that he was wearing last night.’

‘And? You hate him because he turned up in boxers?’

‘No, it doesn’t end there. He was drunk beyond his wits, and confessed to me that he had had a major argument with his *wife*. Prior to that incident, he hadn’t even *mentioned* that he was married!’

‘Oh dear lord! What happened after that?’ Natasha had stopped combing her hair now.

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘Then the almighty Mr Desai tried to make a pass at me. Said he had really *fallen* for me. He tried to force himself against me and started tugging at my T-shirt. And I was naïve. Had it not been for his foul smelling mouth, he probably would’ve gotten what he wanted.’

‘Are you saying that he was married to some lady and tried sleeping with you?’ Natasha was horrified now. She had witnessed her parents getting separated at one point of time and positively loathed the idea of an extramarital affair.

‘Well, yes. But what he tried to do that day would get categorized by many discerning individuals today as *rape*.’

‘What did you do?’

‘I shoved him away and threatened to call his wife if he didn’t leave. I had figured that he would be sober the next day and I could apologize for my rudeness in exchange for a sincere apology from him, but instead, what I encountered the following morning at class was the humiliation of being asked to leave the workshop. He called my work useless and said I had no

business trying to be in the photography industry.'

'What the . . .! And you let him get away with that? You could've gone to the police, or at the very least, spoken to his wife!'

'Well, the world wasn't as concerned then as it is now. And people don't remember stories from every individual's life. I was one big nobody back then, and I am an even bigger nobody right now. Years later, I did muster up the courage to talk to his wife and his family. But then I learnt that his wife had divorced him and his family didn't want anything to do with him. I don't know what he did to earn that, but I definitely think he would've deserved it. Anyway, after learning of his solitude, I figured that time and age may have mellowed him down. But looking at him today, I realized he's still the arrogant bastard that he always was. Pardon my language,' she added, realizing that she too was in the company of a minor.

'I'm sorry to hear that, Mitali,' Natasha said, holding her teacher's arm. 'I'll warn Shreya about him.'

'Good. Now let's hurry up and finish this thing. Let's hope it doesn't drone on for long!'

@BOOKHOUSE1

Chapter Eight

Teenage Wasteland

@BOOKHOUSE1

The group of students looked like tiny soldiers dressed for battle as they assembled in the living room space. By the time Mitali and Natasha reached in their attire, the other three were already picking up their backpacks, with their cameras hanging by the neck-straps.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Got busy correcting your makeup?' Sanjib asked, directing the question pointedly at Mitali.

'Yeah, what took you so long?' Shreya joined in, as she drew clearer to Natasha. She was quite obviously trying to build a fake impression on Sanjib Desai by expressing her concern over the extra ten-odd minutes that had been lost in the dressing table conversation.

Natasha elbowed her in the ribs and was very curt about the whole thing.

'We need to talk, bitch. And stop wagging your tail around oldie there. He's a sick bastard.'

Shreya was surprised at the disclosure, but she trusted Natasha's instincts to know that she was almost never wrong about these things.

Meanwhile, Abhinav was busy admiring Urvashi since the time he saw her in the baggy camouflage dress. To him, she looked cuter than ever now. He tried to gather all his courage and told her, 'You look even hotter in this uniform than those hot pants from last night.'

'They're called *hipsters,*' she corrected him. 'And what makes you think

I'm not still wearing them under these?' She put her fingers in the pockets of her track pants to stretch the elastic and pulled them down slightly to disclose that she was indeed wearing her skimpy garment underneath the patterned dress.

'And why exactly are you still wearing them?' he asked, surprised.

'Simple. I bought them a year back. And back at home, my folks would kill me if they spotted me wearing them. So on this trip I'm going to keep them on for as long as possible,' she grinned at him.

'The two of you, please call me or that Rocky guy or *whatever* if you need anything, okay?' Mitali was speaking to Yuvraj and Ananya before the troupe departed from the cottage.

'Of course. We'll be fine,' Yuvraj assured her once again, before she stepped out.

'I've signed two course completion certificates for the two of you, they're kept on your coffee table,' Sanjib bellowed as he got closer to the door.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Watching the puzzled expression on Yuvraj and Ananya's face, he clarified, 'In case I don't make it back alive from the trip, I don't wanna end up breaking my promise. And in case we *do* make it back safely, we'll see you in exactly seventy-two hours.'

'Huh. *Dramatics*!' Mitali muttered under her breath, loud enough for just Natasha to hear. She joined in.

'*Well*, you know, we could always throw him in front of a raging rhino and make it look like an accident!' Natasha said, and the two of them started giggling while walking towards a vehicle that had been arranged for the expedition.

Back in the cottage, Yuvraj was counting the number of steps it took for the group to reach the vehicle. He watched them load their luggage into the mini truck, waited till the vehicle took off, and once they were out of sight, a big grin spread on his face. He retreated inside and shut the door behind him. As he pulled on the latch to secure it, he heard a small noise at the corner of the living room. It was Ananya, she had pulled out the cord that went into the telephone.

As he looked at her in puzzlement, she explained, ‘I have enough biscuits and cakes and water in my bag, I don’t think we’ll require the services of mister Rocky for the next seventy-two hours.’

Yuvraj didn’t need too many hints. From the minute she had kissed his hand, he knew that she wanted it as much as him. And it lay right there for him to understand in all clarity. Maybe this trip was all that they had to make the best of their time together. He sprinted across the floor, almost tripping over the coffee table as he knocked it sideways while running towards her.

His lips touched hers, and she felt a shiver run down her spine, all the way to her toes. She shook, as she pulled him closer to her, and melted in his arms. He pulled back slightly and looked into her eyes. She looked into his, and they stayed like that for a wonderful moment. They had seventy-two blissful hours together ahead, and their eyes shone bright with dreams of what lay ahead.

There had been times back in Delhi when Ananya had grimaced at the sight of couples lost in their own worlds, unaware of what was happening around them. They could be seen everywhere—in streets, cafes and malls—boys and girls locking their lips, thinking that they were away from prying eyes. But Ananya had seen such behaviour with her own eyes on more than one occasion. And each time, she had silently discarded the possibility of her and Yuvraj, locked in an embrace that no one could see. And yet, now—here they were.

@BOOKHOUSE1

He rested his forehead against hers and they smiled. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. She touched his face, as is to make sure he was for real and that they really were alone. Then she slid her fingers down to his neck and pecked his nose. He held her hand and they walked together to his bed. Yuvraj had switched on the music player on his phone and started playing a track that Ananya had never heard. It had a lot of synthesized accordion music.

‘What is this?’ she asked him, looking into his damningly beautiful eyes.

‘Baba O’ Riley’ he said, and then continued as Ananya looked perplexed, ‘It’s a song by the rock group, The Who.’

‘I’ve never heard it,’ she said.

‘Well, maybe you heard it in the background score of *The Girl Next Door* —it was renamed as *Teenage Wasteland* after the lyrics.’

‘Nope, no clue at all. Don’t you have anything by Taylor Swift?’ she asked, in her innocent voice. Deep inside, she didn’t care about the music. She wanted to feel his lips on hers again.

It didn’t take him too long to figure that out . . .

❀ ❀ ❀

Later, they snuggled up under a blanket by the living space, and she fell asleep in his arm as he kept staring at her face.

She woke him up late in the evening with a nibble on his neck. When he open the his eyes, he rose with a jump and gathered her in his arms.

That night, they slept like babies, completely unaware of the trouble their friends were in.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Chapter Nine

Lights, Camera, Action

@BOOKHOUSE1

The mini truck had left the cottage at around 10 in the morning, and they had continued riding uphill till they reached the other end of the estate's boundary. This part of the area didn't have an electrocuted fence, as per the map that Mitali had held up against her face.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Natasha had started reading the weird riddle which she had scribbled down earlier, as soon as they had boarded the vehicle. She no longer had the same enthusiasm to actually *win* the prize, but she had even better motivation to get hold of Desai's camera now.

"You may believe that survival is a game for those who play. Yet the smartest of the herd will save the day."

For Natasha, winning came almost as naturally as her ability to breathe and she found it hard to imagine any plausible scenario in which she *wasn't* going to be the smartest of the herd. But she was aware that she definitely wasn't a strong survivor, as far as jungle law was concerned. She really didn't see herself running toe-to-toe with a leopard or a rhino if the need arose, and constantly thought about ways to use her shortcomings to her advantage. But every time she tried to fixate on the survival part, Sanjib Desai's words deafened her. It seemed like once he was outdoors, screaming was the only way he could talk.

The first phase of the workshop 'An introductory session on basic camera operation guidelines' had apparently begun, without anyone so much as

realizing it. Every minute or so, Sanjib would throw a snippet of information at them, about light sensitivity and shutter speed and how to control them efficiently. His lessons were lined with crude one-liners and jokes that nobody found funny.

Whenever one of them would draw a deep sigh at digesting technical stuff about the lens, Sanjib happened to treat that as a personal insult, and responded with slurs that cut deep. Natasha had already managed to fill Shreya in about the misadventures of their teacher in her youth and Shreya, too, had edged away from Sanjib Desai which quite obviously did not go unnoticed from the leech's eyes.

Once, when Shreya was caught flipping nonchalantly through the pages of her book as Sanjib was trying to explain the concept of wide-angle shots and when to use them, he stopped midway through his explanation and asked Shreya, 'You know, you can really make money in your initial days as a photographer. Do you know how?'

Shreya, with all her innocence had played game to the trick question and had shaken her head with genuine curiosity.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'By selling your goddamn camera!' he had exclaimed, and then guffawed irritably at his own joke. None of the others laughed. Shreya, in her moment of humiliation, stayed silent and Urvashi tried to console her.

'Hey now . . . He doesn't really mean that!' she exclaimed, patting Shreya on the back.

'He most certainly does,' Natasha swooped in immediately thereafter. She wasn't sure about befriending this Good-Shepherd-Whatever girl either. After all, from the moment she had arrived on the scene, her wannabe crush Abhinav had taken away all the attention from Natasha and was now showering it on her instead.

'The thing is,' Natasha continued, 'he's an asshole who's also brilliant at the technical aspect of what he's teaching. If you intend to beat him at the end of the game, you need to start paying attention. Let's get to that now, shall we?'

Shreya nodded in assent and closed the book, placing it her inside her backpack. From that moment on, she resolved to be wholly devoted to the

workshop and not in the least bit be affected by Sanjib's indiscretions.

Abhinav was paying rapt attention to Mr Desai's words as he spoke, never missing out the finer details, trying to grab a hint for what he might look for in the winner.

'Remember,' Sanjib echoed over them, 'you already have what it takes to win. The only thing you need to do is to *discover* it, because that's exactly what photography is all about.'

'That is such utter B-school crap,' Mitali pointed out, but didn't speak loud enough for Sanjib to hear the words.

They stopped a mile short of the Masinagudi border, and Sanjib asked them to get down from the truck. They were surprised to see that the place was well planned, considering the fact that they were deep in the woods now. There was a big wooden cross made out of logwood, and the tip was painted in white.

'Radium,' Sanjib explained, 'will act as a marker at night and won't attract flies because it isn't a source of heat or light.'

@BOOKHOUSE1

'This is our rendezvous point. During different phases of the workshop, we will need to assemble at this very area, so remember it well.'

'Well, we all have maps of the estate, so don't think getting *lost* is anyone's headache right now,' Urvashi pointed out.

'Wise words, but when you're chasing nature the way you're supposed to —you're *bound* to lose track of your material possessions. Your mind is the only map you should learn to trust,' he finished, before Abhinav raised another point.

'Well, our minds *and* our cameras!' he said out loud, and immediately realized that it had won him brownie points with the coach.

'I like you, what's your name again?'

'Abhinav Gandhi.'

'Oh yes, you're the kid from Doon. Tell me, Abhinav—have you ever been out in a forest like this?'

‘Nope, and I was wondering, I’ve never even seen pictures of this place online! I mean, none of the catalogues or articles available online have any indication of how beautiful the southern landscape is!’

‘Well, that’s partially because most of this territory is uncharted and unaccounted for. And this part of the estate has always been in private hands, and external photography has always been prohibited.’

‘Until you came along, right?’ Abhinav asked, grinning. This time, his smile wasn’t returned.

‘Not quite. You see, I still don’t believe that it’s a good idea for any picture of this estate to float online. All of you are required to delete the contents of your cameras and memory sticks after the expedition is over.’

‘So, you mean, we can’t take any of the photographs back home?’ Urvashi joined in on the conversation, suddenly interested. She had hoped to show her father some wonderful clicks that she would produce.

‘I’m afraid not, Miss Nambiar.’ He looked at her grimly, and then continued, ‘However, it may interest you to note that the criterion for winning my contest is definitely a photograph. But it’s up to each one of you to figure out the relevance of the little . . . *Poem* that I had sent out earlier.’

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‘So, where do we begin?’ Shreya asked.

‘Oh, didn’t your teacher share my memo with you? We will begin with an explorative study of this estate. But before that, does anyone have any questions about operating the equipment?’

And then it began, the kids, all excited at the prospect of using the different dials and buttons on their cameras, began questioning Sanjib about the advantages of zooming in and panning out, the difference between a low-light shot and a silhouette, and much more.

By late afternoon, Mitali and Natasha had spread out on the forest grass, and were trying to catch a nap. In the meantime, Sanjib was training the other three on capturing details.

‘See that leaf, how it’s moving? Your target is to capture this leaf in its entirety, not just an image. When someone looks at the photograph you’ve clicked, they should be able to envisage the movements that it went through

while you clicked the shot. Can you do that?'

Urvashi, with her suitable amount of expertise at clicking inanimate objects, tried her hand first, but the results were *far too deadpan* by the standards of Sanjib's words. Next up, Abhinav tried his luck at capturing the leaf. He took about fifteen minutes to zoom in just the right amount, so that the dewdrops on the leaf were clearly visible. He moved around the plant in question to get the best possible angle for the twig, and when he pressed the shutter, he was positive that this would be the best picture he had clicked in his entire life.

When he showed it to Sanjib, he scratched the unshaven surface of his chin and said, 'I don't know . . . It's either tastefully done or utter crap. And till the time I don't admit that it's tastefully done, you'll just have to assume that it's utter crap.'

In the meantime, Shreya had already taken three hurried snaps, in a new manoeuvre that their coach had taught; it was a *burst shot*; a sequence of pictures taken in rapid succession over the time it usually takes for the blink of an eyelid.

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She showed it to Sanjib, right after his critical dissertation of Abhinav's click. He stared at the three pictures for a long time, and finally concluded his judgement.

'Excellent. So far, you alone seem like you've been paying attention to what I've said so far.'

'See,' he continued, showing the others her work, 'this is exactly what I meant by capturing the essence of the leaf. It swayed about half a centimetre between each shot, and these three pictures clearly show that movement. Great job, Shreya, keep it up!'

Shreya tried hard not to beam with pride.

Distressed, Urvashi spoke up, 'Well, like you noted earlier, she has an excellent camera, what with the automated burst shots and all . . .'

'Here, give me yours,' Sanjib laid out his hand for Urvashi's equipment, and she handed it over to him.

'Mmm. Nice, this is a P-series pioneer, right? I used to work with these

when they hired me for those damn calendar shots.' He was making a reference to an infamous calendar shoot where he had insisted that the models pose in the nude. It had been all over the papers, but everyone had chosen to sympathize with the poor old photographer rather than trusting the opinions of those bitchy models who starved themselves for a flatter tummy.

'You're right when you said that your camera doesn't have a burst shot feature. But look at what you can do with it. Go on, try and giggle.'

It was a weird request, but sensing some form of learning in it, Urvashi forced a snigger upon herself. It took her three seconds to flash her teeth and close her lips again. In that time, Sanjib Desai's index finger had pressed the shutter seven times in rapid succession. Once he was done, he pulled the viewfinder away from his eyes and showed the results to Urvashi.

The shots were crystal clear, not a single one of them had so much as a smudgy line or a blotched pixel.

'The trick never lies in equipment and you must learn to *never* credit the camera for a good picture. It's always the artist. I'm assuming your mother bakes, right?'

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Urvashi nodded, unable to comprehend why this was relevant.

'Well then, when she prepares a fantastic batch of cupcakes, do you praise her culinary talents or the oven that she uses?'

It made sense, but she wasn't completely convinced. Ovens did not come with automated recipe features, and no cook had to go through the training of pressing buttons in the blink of an eyelid movement.

'Okay, moving on to the next part of the camera operation—*lenses*. And don't even bother to think for a minute that this is an easy topic. Many times, choosing the right lens makes all the difference between *tasteful* and *utter crap*,' he said, looking pointedly at Abhinav.

Abhinav wanted to argue the point that this statement went against the elemental integrity of what Sanjib had just told them about equipment being a non-issue, but he kept quiet. He had realized that the man had a lot to teach. And now, he knew that the best way to impress Urvashi would be to win the prize camera.

‘This,’ he said, pointing at a cylindrical box, ‘is a wide-angle lens.’

‘See all those panoramic shots of cityscapes and apartment buildings that they use in architecture photography? This is what they use to get those shots. If you look closely,’ he said, clicking open the lens cover, and all three students peered in, ‘you will notice that there are two layers of high index glass, both concave, that go into the outer edge of the lens. This is important, because it can capture light from a wider angle, hence the name.’

He then went on to demonstrate some of the benefits of using the wide-angle lens, by clicking various shots of the estate, and they were impressed with the clicks. Urvashi pleaded her way into clicking a few herself, which Sanjib didn’t admire, but he didn’t downplay them either.

‘You need to keep practising to get better at this. Your strength lies in your stable hand movements, but you seem to lack *vision*.’

‘And you,’ he said, looking at Abhinav, ‘you seem to have wonderful creative vision. But you always fall short of the right amount of executional strategy. You tend to apply too much *technique* into it, and that ruins the shot.’

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‘Well, maybe the two of us should team up, then!’ Abhinav tried to lighten the mood by cracking a joke, but it didn’t go down well with Sanjib.

‘As much as you’d like to enjoy your frolic time, this is a *competition*. And out of all the creative fields that you could’ve chosen to explore, photography happens to be the most competitive. You will either get chosen or you won’t. Teamwork is a good asset to assert your strengths and hide your weaknesses, but it will get you nowhere in a competition, young man.’

Abhinav decided to keep his trap shut now.

‘Moving on,’ Sanjib declared, ‘the other lens that you will encounter in your attempts to get closeup shots, especially when there are artificial lights involved, is known as the *prime* lens. Can anybody explain to the group what a prime lens does?’

Urvashi shot her hand up in the air, and Sanjib nodded at her to speak.

‘A prime lens does the job quite opposite to a wide-angle. Instead of panning out the range of vision, it focuses light that gets reflected from a

single point, thereby turning it into an effective close-up tool. And instead of two concaves, it uses the combination of a low radius concave and a large radius convex, which allows a greater amount of adjustment based on the perceived distance from the viewfinder and the object being captured.' She finished her statement in a single go, which left the other two students spellbound.

'Okay, I see you've done your homework. But let's see if you can use it correctly. One, this is your viewfinder,' he said, handing her back her camera. 'Two, that is your object,' he said, pointing at Abhinav's face. Urvashi was taken aback for a moment, but this was definitely doable.

'Say cheese,' she said, keeping with the sacred tradition of shooting portraits.

After she had clicked three pictures of Abhinav, she looked at the results on the onscreen display, and was disappointed with her own results. The portraits were all red-eyed.

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'Now, as long as you're good with Photoshop, which seems to be evolving as a daily need for all mediocre photographers these days, you can probably get rid of the red-eyes in your post-edit phase.' Sanjib professed. 'But if you want to get it right the first time, you need to think over the obvious flaw that you went through, despite your own perfect description of the prime lens.'

'And . . . What would that be?' Urvashi asked hesistantly.

'The fact that a prime lens *focuses* all the light into one singular object. You need to check for light exposure at all times. The red-eye emerges as a result of unwanted light, and the fact that we're standing here on a bright sunny morning, should immediately trigger the concern of your object *facing* the sunlight. Now you stand here,' he held Urvashi squarely at the shoulder, so that her back faced the sun, 'and look at the camera.'

Before she could even strike a rudimentary smile, Sanjib had pressed the shutter; it predictably generated a flawless portrait.

'See how that works?' he asked, and the students nodded their heads in agreement.

‘By the way, that girl over there, is she a teaching assistant or something?’ He was pointing in the direction of Natasha, who was enjoying a brief séance with Mitali, lying down on the grass.

‘No, she’s a student, in fact, she studies in my class,’ Shreya explained.

‘I see. Give me a minute while I talk to her, will you?’ and he excused himself. The trio waited with bated breath for a series of loud slurs to be hurled at Natasha, but to their surprise, he returned within minutes of talking to her, and did not have his usual grudging look on. Instead, his face contained a smugly, content smile.

‘She’s a feisty one, I asked her what the hell she was up to, missing the introductory session, and she said she had her eyes on the prize, and that in the end, winning is all that will matter. So she gets to enjoy her nap time, while you *losers* get to sweat it out with me. And I mean that in an utterly inoffensive way.’

Urvashi wondered in her head if it was ever inoffensive to call someone a loser, but like most of her thoughts that afternoon; she kept this one to herself.

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They had touched base on mostly everything there was to know about effective camera handling skills, and by the time Sanjib declared that he was hungry, the three of them were confident enough to tell their ISOs apart from shutter exposure.

The driver of their truck—who looked completely different from Rocky (this one was called Stoner and none of them dared to ask why) also turned out to be the culinary expert, as he set up a quirky barbeque arrangement and pulled out a bucket of raw chicken from god knows where.

In an hour’s time, they were munching quite happily at the tastefully roasted chicken pieces, although they really couldn’t tell if it was the taste or their unmatched hunger after the tiring day that had passed so far. Natasha and Mitali ate the least, and nobody was surprised. Sanjib, of course, *had* to make a comment at the way Mitali ate her food.

‘I see you haven’t changed one bit. Always the slow chewer,’ he said, ending his joke with a snort.

‘Sanjib, I would really prefer if you didn’t try to dig up that past of yours every now and then, because I might change my mind and start spilling secrets too,’ she said, without batting an eyelid. Mitali was always quick at repartee while she was eating; though she never realized the source of this strange habit, but it always helped her if she had anything edible in either her hands or her mouth.

Her sudden statement appeared like a slap on Sanjib’s face and he began chewing his food in silence.

After lunch hour was over, Sanjib suggested that they should all take some rest.

‘Tonight we will begin the explorative study that we had spoken about,’ he said in his trademark bossy tone. Only this time, Mitali decided to counter him with questions.

‘And how exactly have you planned that out? Are you familiar with the grounds yourself?’ she asked him, looking at him in the eye.

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He didn’t take long to answer back, though.

‘Oh, you’ll figure it out. As this brilliant young lady had pointed out earlier,’ he said referring to Urvashi, ‘we all have maps. So, I don’t think it’s going to be too much trouble. Can everyone hand me their maps, please? I will mark out the routes that each one needs to follow. And you,’ he said, noticing Mitali’s lips that were about to open, ‘you and I need to talk. In private,’ he added, shaking his head in the direction of the truck.

Mitali stood up and the two of them walked to the door of the truck, where the students couldn’t see them talking. All Abhinav managed to notice was their shadows. Mitali’s hands seemed to be moving a lot, and at the end of their talk, her silhouette appeared to enter the truck. Sanjib returned to their rendezvous-cum-lunch point, and suddenly everyone felt very comfortable without the presence of Mitali.

‘Relax,’ he told the kids. ‘I know I’m somewhat of a hard ass at times, but I wasn’t always this way, I’m sure you guys can work your heads around that idea, right? Now your teacher *there*,’ he said, moving his thumb over his own shoulder and in the direction of the truck, ‘has a rather non-redeeming image of me stuck at the back of her head. But neither of us would want to

spoil the fun for you guys. So we reached a consensus, I won't bother her with my remarks, and in return, she's going to let me do my job, to teach you photography. To me, that sounds fair. And the poor lady needs a break anyway.'

He looked at his wristwatch before continuing, 'It's four thirty in the afternoon right now. Here in the forest, it'll start getting dark soon after five. And you need to find your spots before that happens.'

'Wait, *find our spots*? What's that supposed to mean?' Natasha interjected.

'I've assigned all of you some very specific spots to shoot with your cameras. And that's how you will explore this estate. Now, after you hand me your maps, I will mark them out for you. STONER!' He called out suddenly to the pale and lanky driver-cum-chef who came running upon being called.

'Stoner here will assist you with the initial directions. The vehicle will stay here at all times, and the radium on the cross-tip is here to mark our position, so even if you're trying to get back in the middle of the night, you'll find us with ease. Does anyone have any questions?'

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'I have one!' Natasha raised her hand.

'Yes?'

'What about the riddle that you had mentioned? When do we get to work on that?'

'Let's say that the riddle part of this workshop is effective immediately,' he said, and realized that none of them seemed to understand. He elaborated further.

'The time window in which you're supposed to click your winning picture has begun. The clock is ticking. Can I have your maps now, please?'

'Yeah, sure,' Natasha said, and handed over her copy of the map. The others followed suit.

'Great. Now let's see, we have four markers here in the estate, and there are four of you, so that's a perfect match. You will have plenty of opportunities to get fantastic shots of the rainforest, and you need to report

back here exactly in forty-eight hours. Is everyone clear on that?'

A unified utterance of 'Yess suh' came from the students.

'And please remember, I tried to stress this earlier when *you* were asleep,' he said, looking at Natasha. 'This is a competition. And teamwork really isn't your big *mantra*. My advice is, work alone and get the best results. You'll have a much better appreciation of the landscape that way.'

Stoner, then, explained the basic layout of pathways built around the estate to the kids who listened with rapt attention.

'Yellow lines are road markers, white chalked circles are the spots where you're supposed to put up tent, green dots are places where you'll find equipment to build a fire.' It seemed pretty straightforward.

'You will follow the first set of yellow lines, till the lines space out. And then, the arrows will guide you.' Sanjib joined in himself, as he handed out the marked maps to the kids.

'Now hurry,' he said. 'It's almost time for sundown.'

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As they started walking towards the edges of the clearing, ready to enter the forest, Natasha saw Abhinav following Urvashi. She decidedly walked close to Shreya and when they were out of the coach's sight, Shreya turned to face her.

'You heard him. This is a competition, no teamwork, all of that?'

'I don't give a damn, Shreya. And I don't trust that snotty old man one bit. Competitions may be good enough for miniature battles, but teams happen to win wars. And this is a war, whether you've realized it or not.'

'Is this because of that Urvashi chick digging in on all of that Doon dude's charms? 'Cos you know, I think it's a lost game for you down there.'

'It's not about that, Shreya. I need to get that camera from Mr Desai. I really *really* need it,' she finished.

'Okay, let's keep walking, then. My map here says, if we follow *this* trail,' she said, pointing at the yellow chalk markers on the forest floor, 'we will reach the next clearing in three hours, and we can set up camp there. Wanna race for it?' she asked, but quietened up after the look Natasha gave

her.

‘We’re smart people, Shreya. We don’t run because people ask us to run. We sprint when we feel the time’s right and we stand still when we feel the ground’s right.’

‘Okay, so what do we do now?’

‘Let’s walk,’ Natasha replied, and pointed at the road that led its way as a narrow clearing through the forest. For the next two hours, they kept walking, occasionally tripping over twigs and small branches that lay hither and thither. As the evening drew towards a close, the sound of crickets went up to a deafening level.

When Shreya started complaining, Natasha said, ‘Relax, it isn’t as if we’re bored to death in the cottage like Ananya and Yuvraj.’

On the other side of the forest, Abhinav found it hard to match pace with Urvashi, whose brisk walk had the capacity of seriously challenging his modest jog. By the end of two hours, when they had been walking for what seemed like forever, Abhinav called out for truce.

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‘I never took you for the athletic types!’ he said panting.

She stopped in her tracks and looked around. ‘I didn’t take you to be one of those *non*-athletic types!’ she countered.

‘Well, I guess the balance might tilt things in our favour right about now.’

‘Whatever does that mean?’ she asked him, a frown appearing on her face.

‘Well, it doesn’t surprise me that you haven’t noticed yet, but *look*,’ he said, thrusting the map in her face, ‘as per the map, there’s supposed to be a body of water right about *here*,’ and he waved his arms around to indicate that he was talking about their present location, where there was no sign of water. ‘Also, true to what Sanjib had told us earlier, there are no more connected yellow lines on the forest; we’ve been walking based on pointing arrows. No, actually *I’ve* been walking, you on the other hand, have been *sprinting* through all of it.’

‘What are you implying, Abhinav?’ she asked, a bit worried now.

‘I’m not implying anything. I’m merely stating the obvious fact that we’re lost. And we didn’t read the directions wrong; it’s just that the map has been doctored. These aren’t the same maps that we handed to Mr Desai; he must’ve swapped them over when Stoner was explaining the marker system to us.’

‘What? We’re lost?’ she exclaimed.

‘Yup. Lost in the middle of a tropical rainforest, no less! Well, at least there’s the comfort of knowing that we’re dressed in camouflage.’

‘Seriously, *dude*? You’re going for sarcasm right now? For all we know we could starve out here.’

‘Okay, first, you need to stop worrying so much. It’s been ages since I got into any amount of trouble,’ he said, brandishing his zippo lighter. He was feeling strangely elated.

‘No, first you need to tell me what the hell that is for,’ she said, pointing at the lighter.

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘Well, I’m about to break a rule, seeing as the judges don’t seem to believe in fair play. Here’s the first thing you don’t know about me. I smoke. And even though I’m going to tell you that I might have a solution in mind, I highly doubt that you’re going to believe me. So here’s how it will play out. I’m going to sit *here,’* he said, parking his butt on a large boulder, ‘and enjoy my first cigarette after *hours*. You will allow me the latitude of keeping my thoughts to myself, and at the end of it, I will get us out of this mess,’ he said calmly.

‘Well, I seriously doubt the fact that you’ve ever been in any kind of trouble, going by your clean chit record,’ she said, and went on as she enjoyed his look of surprise. ‘That’s right; I thought you were interesting so I looked you up. There’s absolutely no evidence on Facebook to indicate that you’ve ever found yourself in a mess, you have a stuck-up group of friends who hardly post anything which is not strictly academic, and you belong to a family of rich Gujarati businessmen running a *dairy*,’ she finished.

‘Well, again, you’ve done your homework. But I’ve done mine, too,’ he said, calmly sucking on his cigarette and blowing the smoke away from her. ‘You’ve got straight A’s in almost all your subjects, and you’ve decidedly

kept a low profile on the athletic front, even though you received excellent recommendations from your basketball coach in the fifth grade. And even he fails to understand why. That's right, I chatted with your basketball coach. But I can totally understand what he can't grasp right now. You like keeping your good girl goggles on when your parents are around, so that you can enjoy your naughty girl self when they aren't looking, like right now, you're sitting here with me.'

'As you said earlier, the two of us make for an excellent team!' she said, and smiled at him. In the meantime, she also took her camera out.

'What're you doing?' he asked, as she shot pictures of him smoking.

'Relax, you heard the man, we aren't allowed to export these pictures outside the premises of this estate. So I can't possibly post these online for anyone to see. I'm just trying to get my share of prime lens shots. With no sun to shine on your face,' she had added the last line as an intended pun, and hoped that Abhinav would appreciate it. There was no way to find out if he did, because all he returned was a smile at her.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'You think I've never been in trouble? Have I ever told you about the time when I smashed a kid's head open with a rock?'

Chapter Ten

The Riddler’s Game

@BOOKHOUSE1

It was almost 2 a.m. in the night when Ananya woke up with a start. She nudged Yuvraj, who was sleeping next to her, with his arms around her waist.

'What happened, baby?' he asked in his soft-yet-groggy sleep-induced voice, as he watched her sit upright on the bed.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Nothing much, I just had this strange sensation that Mitali ma'am is in trouble. Should we try calling her ourselves? Isn't it a bit strange that she hasn't called for the entire day, not even to ask how we were doing?'

'Relax sweetie, it's probably nothing.' He tugged at her shoulders to pull her back, right next to him where he could smell her hair.

'Yuvraj?' she called out to him. She couldn't get herself to fall asleep anymore.

'Yes, baby?'

'What happened this morning, it isn't going to change things between us is it?'

'Of course not, sweetie. Well, there's one thing that's going to change.'

'What's that?'

'I think I'm even more in love with you,' he said, pinching her nose. That always made her blush, and it did now.

‘I love you, baby,’ she said, cuddling up next to him in a tight embrace. This was the first time she had called him *baby*, it had always been the other way around.

‘Close your eyes and think about me. I’m going to kiss you good night and then in the morning, I’m going to make some terrific breakfast for you.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ she teased him playfully before planting a peck on his right cheek.

She closed her eyes again, and before she knew it, she was dreaming.

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The next morning, Mitali Roy found it very difficult to open her eyes. Every time she tried, her head throbbed painfully. She fought against it, until she found the strength to climb out of the back seat of the truck. She tried hard to remember the events from the previous night or was it the afternoon? She couldn’t decide. All she remembered was accepting a bottle of water from Sanjib, and everything seemed to have gone dark after he helped her get into the truck.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She felt some of her strength return, mostly as anger, when she saw Sanjib shooting pictures of the truck with his camera.

‘Get last . . . You’re spoiling my frame!’ he complained, as she paced towards him.

‘What did you do, Sanjib?’

‘Nothing, I just tried to maintain . . .’ he stuttered, but she had rushed to him and pushed him on his shoulder, hitting his balance and sending him back reeling.

‘WHAT DID YOU DO, SANJIB?’ She was screaming now, as she stood looming above him, pressing her shoe into his shoulder where she knew it would hurt.

He grabbed one of her legs with both hands and pulled swiftly. It worked, she lost her balance and fell sideways into the grass.

‘I had to get you to sleep, Mitali, can’t you see that? You would *never*

have agreed to it.'

'Sanjib, I'm begging you, please tell me, where are the kids?'

'They're in the jungle.' He let the words sink in for a brief moment and then continued. 'And they're probably lost in their tracks right now,' he said, furnishing the real maps from within the pockets of his jacket.

'What? How could you . . .?'

'It's all for the essence of the art, Mitali. They will never learn to appreciate that which is unknown, unless they venture out with the truest form of not knowing what lies in store for them.'

'I will have you *fucking* arrested, you do realize that, don't you?'

'Oh no, I don't think you can, Mitali. Remember those signed consent forms that you mailed me? Well, they weren't just pieces of paper, you know. My lawyer has worked on enough photo release documents to understand the legal implications of my, well . . . *Way of working*. So the forms completely indemnify me from anything that might happen to the kids.'

@BOOKHOUSE1

'You're a sick, crazy man, Sanjib Desai. I need my phone.'

'Sure, go ahead. It's out of reception, anyway. And even if you *did* manage to get through to your school or the parents of those kids, I assure you that they will bring forth all their ire on you, not me!'

Sanjib Desai had known that his plan had a chance of backfiring at this stage, but he had prepared well to defend himself. And the consent forms were very explicit about the fact that he was in no way responsible for any danger that befell the kids during the workshop. The parents had signed it themselves. His instructions to his lawyer had been very clear, 'Make it rock solid. Even if a tiger comes our way and I ask one of the kids to go play with it, it shouldn't come back to bite me in the ass.' And his lawyer had taken care of the paperwork.

'And why does my head feel like it's about to explode into a million pieces?' Mitali asked, slowly trying to get up.

'Ah, *that*,' Sanjib spoke with pride, the kind that sociopaths truly felt after accomplishing bizarre targets. 'That, my lady was the oldest trick in the

book. I gave you a *roofie* in the water. It has no taste or odour, so don't blame your pretty little head. You had no way of knowing.'

'Sanjib, do you even realize what you've done? These are kids, not trained army personnel! You sent them into a forest without telling them where they're going?'

'Mitali, my riddle was very clearly laid out for everyone to see. I need to know who's the smartest. But I also want to know that they're the best at survival. I don't just *hand* out participation diplomas like I used to, you know. I want to *test* my students, and I never had the right chance earlier.'

'Bullshit. You signed out two certificates for the kids back at the cottage!' she pointed out.

'Yes, but they really didn't want to learn now, did they? On the other hand, *these* kids,' he said, pointing towards the jungle, 'are a lot more passionate about photography than what I had imagined. And Mitali, if my winner is out there, I'm one hundred per cent positive that he or she will make it back in time.'

@BOOKHOUSE1

'And what about the others, Sanjib? Will you let them rot in the forest as punishment for not breaking through your precious riddle?'

'Relax! I said I know this place like the back of my head. They'll never get past the estate borders in forty-eight hours. So whoever doesn't turn up by that time, I'll send Rocky and Stoner to find and bring them back.'

'That doesn't cut it, Sanjib. You need to send a search party right now. They've already spent a night in the woods!'

'Exactly,' Sanjib said, smiling. 'I'm so excited to find out what they've been doing!'

Inside the forest, it was Shreya who first found out that they were lost, and despite Natasha's arguments, showed her that the map was clearly forged. The previous night, they had reluctantly set up camp in a completely unknown part of the forest, which contrary to the map's description, wasn't cleared out or checked against the presence of wild animals. Shreya slept, hugging Natasha every time they heard a wild animal scream.

'Do you think the others got fake maps, too?' Natasha asked her, once

she had finally accepted the fact that they were lost.

‘Judging by the standards of the menacing man, I’d say a yes.’

‘Damn! How do we get out of this?’

‘Okay, you need to calm down, too, remember what you told me earlier? This isn’t a petty battle, it’s a war. And we’re a team. We’ll figure this out.’

‘Did you get enough shots of the landscape while we were travelling through?’

‘Well—yeah, mostly. *Burst shots,*’ she said, as she handed her camera over to Natasha for her to examine the photographic evidence of their lost trail.

‘Hmm . . . I think we might have something here.’ Natasha drew out a sketchpad from her backpack and got busy drawing a map.

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Meanwhile, at Abhinav’s insistence, Urvashi and he had completely discarded the fake map’s directions and had instead embarked on a trail that Abhinav dictated.

‘Trust me, I know,’ was the only response that he gave, whenever she questioned him about their whereabouts. But the remarkable amount of confidence in his voice inspired trust; and she wasn’t wary of listening to him, especially after he predicted the possibility of coming across three objects that had been in the original maps.

They had so far crossed a landmark banyan tree, a hideout for peacocks, and another clearing in the forest where they had set up their tent. Urvashi and Abhinav decidedly slept on opposing sleeping bags. What he didn’t know was that she had stayed awake a little longer than him, just to monitor his sleeping habits. Only when she was convinced that he didn’t snore, did she rest her own eyelids.

The next morning, they found themselves shivering. It was extremely cold in the morning.

‘I can’t believe this is summer!’ Abhinav exclaimed, as he found his teeth

rattling continuously.

‘It’s the altitude,’ Urvashi explained. She was an Ooty girl and knew the climate around these regions well. She had fortunately packed in an extra pair of gloves and scarves, which she brandished from her backpack and offered to Abhinav. He declined at first.

‘They’re too girly!’ he complained.

‘Well, luckily you’ll be in the company of someone who appreciates their utility for as long as you’d be wearing them. So I suggest that you put them on!’ she insisted, until he gave in. The moment he had draped the pink scarf around his head, she shot a picture of him.

‘Hey, stop that!’ he said, and ran after her, but she was too fast for him. Reluctantly, he gathered his stuff and moved out too.

‘So, today’s our last day in the forest, Urvashi,’ he said, as he climbed out of the tent behind her.

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘Oh, you’re *that* confident, huh? Tell me something. How *have* you managed to keep us on track, after all?’ she asked him, brows raised.

‘Ooh . . . You wanna know my secret, cap’n?’ he asked, quoting from ‘The Avengers’.

‘Here,’ and he offered her a chance to peek into the display of his camera. She took a long time to examine the picture and then smiled back at him.

‘Abhinav, if that isn’t the winning picture, I’m going to kill Mr Desai himself.’ And she broke into a wide grin. ‘How did you know?’

‘I didn’t, really. I had a hunch that he was up to something fishy when he was talking to Mitali ma’am behind the truck yesterday. And when she didn’t return, I wanted to be prepared for the worst.’

‘So, what do we do now? On our *last* day in the forest?’

‘You tell me, you brought me here,’ Abhinav said, looking at her.

‘I most certainly did *not*!’ she exclaimed.

‘Oh yes, you did. You told me about the whole workshop, you went on

for hours and hours on chat about how you had always wanted to learn from Mr Desai first hand, and then you casually laid out the fact that external applicants could contact Sanjib's office directly.'

'Mmm . . . You're good at this. But tell me, why'd you sign up in the first place, just because I mentioned that it was possible?' She wanted a confession out of him, before she had to make her own confession.

'No, it isn't just that, Urvashi Nambiar. The truth is, I signed up for the course because I wanted to meet you. And I wanted to meet you because I *like* you.'

'You *like* me, as in?' Urvashi ventured further into his thoughts, not complete satisfied with the answer.

'As in, I *really like* you. I like the way you pout while posing for your pictures, I like the way you tie your hair neatly in two plaits in all your family albums, I like the way you can tell your way around a *kanjeevaram* and a *banarasi*. I also like the way you've fuelled your rebellion by wearing your *hipsters* on this trip, and the way you've managed to win over me with your charms.'

@BOOKHOUSE1

Urvashi's ears went red as she realized that she was blushing.

'Nobody's ever put it like that before,' she confessed, and then immediately regained her haughty posture. 'But, I'll have you know that I *don't* pout, that is in fact my natural jawline and I've never worn a *Banarasi* in my life!' She was smiling at him.

'Hey, can you take us to *that* stream from where we are right now?' She was referring to the flowing water that they had heard when they had first arrived at the Checkpost. He was marvelled at the way her mind worked, too, fifty meters south of Singara Checkpost, which in fact was very close to their location.

'But I've heard that . . .' Abhinav wanted to express his concern over leopards, but she didn't let him finish.

'Leopards don't venture out in the daytime. They're nocturnal hunters. The best we can hope to find are peacocks, rabbits and maybe a rhino,' she said, trying to get him a bit scared.

‘After what I saw, in my ride to the estate, I don’t think any rhino worth mentioning would ever scare me again.’

As they walked towards the stream, Abhinav and Urvashi questioned each other about all the things that they had skipped on chat. Some of them were easy to guess, though. Abhinav found it a cakewalk to dwell upon the possible food habits of Urvashi Nambiar.

‘Your family is a vegetarian, like all Nambiars, but you are an exception, of course. I saw you munching well on the roasted chicken yesterday. Which leads me to believe that you relish the types of cuisine that aren’t cooked at home.’

‘Okay, that one you’ve got it right,’ she said, without turning back at him. She tried her hand next at the guessing game. ‘You have a sibling and you’re really close. But you haven’t spoken to them in a very long time and that makes you sad.’

Abhinav was shocked. He had never disclosed this on any public forums, and none of his Doon buddies or Facebook friends knew about it. He also knew that the Presidency girl, Natasha and Urvashi hadn’t had any time to interact at all. He rushed forward and held Urvashi’s hand.

@BOOKHOUSE1

‘How in the world did you know that?’ he demanded.

‘It’s called female instinct, Mr Gandhi. Your inhibitions about talking to women can be explained very simply by the fact that you’ve perhaps always confided in just one female person in the family, and then suddenly she was taken away from you. I know your mother’s alive, so it can’t be her. So my next best guess is that you had an elder sister. Is she . . .?’

‘Alive? Yes.’

‘Then? What happened to her?’

‘It’s a long story. My parents found out that she was dating a guy outside the community, things got ugly, they had the boy humiliated across the city by smearing dung on his face—*yes, it still happens in India*, and then he refused to ever talk to her again. Meanwhile my parents found a match for her, and almost immediately after she turned eighteen, her hand was pawned off for marriage.’

‘Okay, and did you hear from her later?’

‘A couple of times, sure, but I always got the feeling that she couldn’t tell me everything over the phone. Lots of times, I insisted my father to take me to visit her at her in-laws. But he never agreed; there’s this whole touchy part about Indian fathers not stepping into their daughter’s household once she’s married, I think its complete bullshit but nobody listened to me at the time. Anyway, I joined Doon soon after the whole affair, and my life has been one long clean chit since then, as you correctly pointed out earlier.’

‘I’m so sorry to hear that, Abhinav. But you know you really need to talk to your sister when you get back home. If you had so much trouble going through life without her presence, imagine how tough it would’ve been for her, without her brother!’

Abhinav was taken aback again at what Urvashi had just said. More than anything else, the truth of her words struck him deeply. He felt like hugging Urvashi and leaned in a little bit. Urvashi leaned in, too, hoping that maybe Abhinav was going to swoop in for a kiss. But their heads collided midway as both of them were trying to go in different directions altogether. After a slight bump, Abhinav finally realized that Urvashi was expecting a kiss; he moved his head to face her. He had never kissed someone before her.

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But Urvashi wasn’t going to let him lose a moment and won it back immediately. She pointed distractingly at the stream that lay ahead of them. It was sparkling white water which appeared to have flown down from the *Nilgiri* hills. No wonder the members of the jungle community trusted the water, Abhinav thought to himself as he spotted a duck reaching out into the stream with its bill to sprinkle a dab of water on itself.

‘Watch this,’ Urvashi said, and she kicked her trekking boots off slowly, as she began walking towards the stream.

‘Wait, what do you think you’re doing?’ he shouted behind her.

She just turned to look at him and said, ‘They say you can’t be a true photographer or a painter unless you manage to capture one of these. And give it your best shot, Abhinav, you’ll get just one chance to click it.’

She continued walking towards the stream, and suddenly, Abhinav realized that he could no longer hear the stream flowing or the crickets

chirping in the background. He didn't flinch at the blazing sunlight and completely ignored the little ants that constantly crept up his socks. His eyes were focused on only one thing—the emerging silhouette of Urvashi Nambiar as she descended the pathway to the stream with the air of a true celestial princess.

First, the shoes came off. As she dipped one of her feet in the water, she unbuttoned and took off her jacket. She turned to face away from him as she loosened her track pants and pulled them down, below her knees and tossed the ensemble aside.

Urvashi was back in her world, and she felt a shivery breeze collide with her skin, almost as if every bit of her body was breathing. It felt good to breathe openly, outside the restrictive noose of *kurtis* and *salwar suits* and jackets.

Abhinav was already looking at her through the viewfinder. His hands seemed to know exactly what they were doing with the sensor adjustments. He remembered the eccentric coach's words. 'Capture the essence' rang in his ears as he tried to capture what he was witnessing.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Urvashi's perfectly bronze skin shone magnificently under the sun, teasing Abhinav's eyes with its radiance. She hesitated for a moment, and then turned around to face him, her arms swaying by her side. Abhinav moved in with his lens, and captured the thin outline of her frame against the backdrop of the stream.

Moments after he had hit the shutter, he let the camera hang loosely on his neck as he rushed towards her. This time, he knew he had to go for the kiss. It was beautiful, and one of Abhinav's deepest regrets in life later was the fact that there had been no third photographer to capture his first kiss with Urvashi.

He gradually picked up items of her clothing and put them around her. First, he draped the jacket around her body which was shivering by now.

'I never thought I'd actually say this, but this baggy piece of kitsch actually looks pretty sexy on you!' he observed.

'Show me the picture!' she demanded, and he obliged.

As she looked at the picture he had clicked, it dawned on her that Abhinav had shot the image of her rippling reflection on the surface of the water.

‘You didn’t want to get the *good* part?’ she asked, naughtily. ‘Now I’ll never be able to look back at myself in those hipsters!’

‘Well, you know, that was for my eyes only. Every time I want to go back into that moment, all I have to do is just close my eyes and think about it,’ he said, clasping her hand within his own.

They sat down near the stream for a while, before the clock turned to 4 p.m. and they knew it was time to leave.

‘That way,’ he pointed, when they realized it was time for them to begin their return journey.

‘Are you sure?’ she asked, mockingly. ‘I think it would be fun to lose our way again, don’t you think so too?’

‘Oh, I *know* it would. But for now, we need to get back to the riddler’s base.’

@BOOKHOUSE1

Chapter Eleven

The Last Stand

@BOOKHOUSE1

It was noon the next day, by the time Mitali Roy spotted the kid from Doon and the girl from Good Shepherd walking towards the truck. Sanjib seemed to be happy at the turn of events.

Abhinav was surprised to see Natasha and Shreya waiting with them. He hadn't thought that the girls would've figured it out, too.

@BOOKHOUSE1

'Bravo! So, I take it that you've managed to outsmart the other two, did you get my riddle? Natasha and Shreya did manage to find their way back, but all they did was to use the old Hansel and Gretel trick, they took crumb shots of the pathway and mapped them together to return. But I know that look in your eyes. Please tell me that you've solved the puzzle,' he said, standing up and walking towards the apparent victors.

'Oh yes, I did. The trick was to survive the onslaught you brought upon us and we needed to be careful from the very beginning.'

'So, can we see the winning picture now, please?'

'Yeah, but I have a condition. If I win, I don't want the camera. And in lieu for giving up my prize, I get to retain all the pictures that I've shot. Excluding this one, of course,' and handed out his camera, which Sanjib accepted with shaky hands.

It was a picture of the original map. Abhinav had chosen to click it the moment he suspected foul play on Sanjib's part.

‘Okay, so you *did* manage to solve the riddle. But didn’t you get any other pictures?’ he asked, attempting to browse through some of his other clicks. But Abhinav was quick in snatching his camera back.

‘Oh no—the deal was, you get to confirm that I won, and now I’m going to delete the map. Done . . . ’ he said, as he pressed a button to delete the picture.

‘Fine, young man. Have it your way.’ Sanjib was fuming. He was not someone who could accept humiliation at the hands of a teenage boy. He was also someone who made it a point to turn things around to his advantage. Being the good guy at the end of the day wasn’t something he fancied doing, but it helped to keep his own image spotless and be outside the radar of angry media mobs.

‘I still have the prize right here,’ he said, pointing at the camera that hung by his neck strap, ‘and nobody has claimed it yet. The next person to offer me their pictures unhesitatingly gets the camera. And this is a one-time offer only; let’s show this arrogant boy his place!’ He was looking at Abhinav with deep loathing in his eyes. He took out the strap from his neck and held out the camera, swinging it by his sides and hoping for the other kids to eagerly offer their own exhibits in exchange for the gadget.

@BOOKHOUSE1

Nobody budged from their places. Sanjib was dumbstruck! A forty thousand dollar camera, and there no takers in a group of educated teenagers!

‘I think all of us here just want to hold on to the pictures that we’ve clicked, and you can shove your prize up your . . . ’ Mitali let out an audible cough just in time.

Sanjib Desai was still rooted to his spot. He felt helpless, as his last trick failed him. The kids that surrounded him seemed to be united in their hatred against him and there was no way of getting out of it.

‘Abhinav, I think this would be a moment worth capturing,’ Natasha said, and held her hands up above her own head, pointing at Sanjib. Abhinav was prepared for his click and pressed the shutter. A bright flash followed, blinding Sanjib’s eyes as he tried to take a step backwards and shield his own eyes at the same time. The poorly constructed manoeuvre to stop him from being photographed resulted in him stumbling over an unburnt log of wood

from the bonfire.

Almost as if by divine intervention, his prized camera slipped out of his hands and fell with a thud into the coarse surface of the forest. Shards of glass from the lens and the black moulded plastic casing flew upwards and grazed his pants before falling back into the ground. Abhinav captured this frame, too, without a moment's hesitation, knowing this shot would definitely be priceless.

As he stood there, motionless, for a few minutes, Abhinav walked up to him and showed him the picture he had just clicked.

'Do you see Mitali ma'am laughing in the picture, even as she's standing at least five metres away from you? I used a wide-angle shot to get that.'

Mitali was still laughing uncontrollably.

'Thing is,' she said, as the kids looked at her, amazed, 'I kicked Sanjib in his sleep last night. And let's suffice to say that I got him right where it hurts the most. And he ended up screaming out an apology to me right then. But this, *this* was really the icing on the cake. Thank you, Natasha. And thank you, Abhinav.'

@BOOKHOUSE1

'You . . . You can't . . .' Sanjib was stuttering.

'Well I think we just did,' Urvashi chimed in, and soon everyone except Sanjib were laughing.

'And wait till the world hears about it, you old freak!' Natasha said, vengefully. She was highly pissed because there were mosquito bites on her calves, which she knew would take ages to disappear, all because of a demented lunatic's idea of fun was so twisted.

'What do you mean?' Sanjib asked facing Natasha.

'Don't play an innocent. I know what you did to Mitali back then. And now you just tried to pull off a potentially fatal trick with all of us. This time, you're not getting out of it scot-free. The moment we set foot outside this damned forest, I'm going to tell the whole world about what you did. And there are five of us against you. I bet people will listen. Oh wait, let them just hear the word attempted rape. What do you think will happen?'

‘You will do no such thing!’ Sanjib replied, suddenly getting very scared. The girl was right. If the kids spoke up, then his reputation wouldn’t be worth a dime. His legacy, the one that he held so closely to his heart, would go down the drain without any hopes of redemption.

‘We most certainly will.’ Shreya, too, was standing next to Natasha and Urvashi now. She cursed herself for having admired a man who could stoop so low.

‘I can give you money. Lots of it, more than all of your allowances combined,’ he said, looking directly at the girls.

‘Listen, you dirty freak!’ Natasha took a step closer to him and he backed off. ‘My dad could buy every inch of you and leave you to dry out in the street. Don’t show me your money.’

‘Well,’ Sanjib asked shiftily, ‘there has to be *something* that I can do!’

‘Maybe there is,’ Shreya spoke up. ‘You will let us out of this freaking forest on your own expense and your driver will get us to Chennai Airport. And you will issue a certificate of excellence for Mitali Roy, claiming that she’s your best student ever and that she’s your legacy.’

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‘Okay. I can do that . . .’ Sanjib said, after a moment’s consideration.

‘And that’s not all. You will decline *all* offers to train people, no matter what happens. You’ve had your share of fun. You will retire now,’ Abhinav said.

‘But photography is my life!’ Sanjib replied.

‘You don’t deserve to live the life that you lead. As it turns out, you’ve bought yourself quite an estate. Spend the rest of your days photographing trees without advertising your *talents*.’

‘And if we ever come to know that you’ve tried to indulge your sickening behaviour with another workshop, I know a guy who writes books for a living. He will draw out your ass and put it in public hands to read,’ Natasha said, landing the final blow on Sanjib’s cowering frame.

The last day campfire, although pre-planned with utmost grandeur, wasn’t enjoyable for Sanjib Desai. Not only had he been outsmarted by a

bunch of seventeen-year olds, he had also suffered tons of humiliation right in front of his most despised pupil.

The Masinagudi estate was even more beautiful by night, and the students realized it as they sat across the campfire which Stoner had built for them. Urvashi sat down close to Abhinav and held his hand as they took turns tossing twigs of dry grass into the fire. They shared their own stories and Natasha fondly recalled how she had sat awake through the night, looking at one picture after the other, trying to recreate the whole map.

'There was one point when I thought I might doze off. But then I spotted Shreya reading her book and then I looked at the title, *Great Expectations*. I realized I couldn't let my best friend down, could I?'

'Aww!' Urvashi and Mitali said in unison, and Shreya was surprised to see Natasha being so candid. The growing-up Natasha that she had known through school had zero respect for anybody other than her own self, and this was a really pleasant change. She smiled inwardly; her friend's recovery plan was working well.

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Urvashi looked at Abhinav's eyes and asked softly, 'What now?'

'Well, now I guess I'm going to look through the admission section for IIT Chennai for college next year!' he said, smiling at her.

'Wouldn't that be a total shame, now? I was hoping to fly out to Delhi, you know—get a change in scenery myself, enjoy somewhat of a different weather, grow out of the *kanjeevaram* pieces . . .!' she said and broke into a grin.

'Yeah, sure, we can do that, too! And Delhi's great in the winters, you know, you could always turn up to check out the place later this year!'

'Yeah, I just might,' she responded, and leaned her head to rest it on his shoulder.

'Hey, we told Yuvraj and Ananya that we'd be back by now,' Mitali observed suddenly, looking at the time.

'Relax, those two are probably asleep watching Rocky's antics,' Natasha brushed the suggestion away.

In the cottage, Yuvraj was helping Ananya pack her things.

‘Wow, another thing I never knew about you! Sports achiever, camera enthusiast, and now an early packer!’ She beamed at him.

‘Yeah,’ he said, running his hands through her hair.

‘Listen, I know you’re pretty much bummed out about me leaving Delhi next year. You didn’t have to tell me,’ he added, when a question appeared on her face. ‘I knew, from the way you’ve been looking at me for the past few weeks.’

‘Hmm . . . and . . .’ Ananya didn’t want to go down with that discussion, which is why she hadn’t brought it up in the first place.

‘Well, I’m reconsidering my options,’ he said, finally, letting the bag go from his hands to face her.

‘Meaning?’ she suddenly had anticipation in her eyes, the kind that he so adored.

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‘Meaning I probably won’t go. I’ll look for colleges in Delhi. I spoke to dad the other day and he seemed to be cool about it, so why not?’

‘You’re the best!’ she said, and hugged him tightly. Just then, they heard a sharp series of knocks on the door.

Ananya quickly let go of her boyfriend and pretended to pack.

Yuvraj opened the door to see a sullen Sanjib Desai.

‘Hey, you made it back alive!’ he exclaimed, not knowing what else to say.

‘Yes, yes I did, we all did. But Rocky here tells me that the two of you didn’t ask him for any food! Don’t the two of you eat?’ he enquired.

‘Oh, I thought I’d try my hand at a bit of cooking, you know, since I couldn’t get to play around with my camera.’

‘Anyway, I wanted to tell you, since you didn’t get a chance to be a part of the workshop, I can get you an early bird entry into the next one. It should happen in about a month’s time,’ Sanjib mentioned casually, as if he was

trying to pass of an unimportant bit of information. As the moment of departure for the other kids had arrived, he was trying to see if he could still lure people to fuel his fun-filled ideas. Yuvraj gave him no such chance.

'Mr Desai, Natasha texted to let me know what went on at your camp. And I wanted to let you know that my mother is a prosecuting lawyer. And she's one of the best in Delhi. Girja Rathore, maybe you've heard of her? And did you *not* register the bit about us exposing you? Natasha wasn't kidding around when she said she knew a popular writer. I know him, too! Now we all have a vehicle to board, so if you could please, just move aside?'

Sanjib Desai didn't speak up after that, but merely showed him the door as a polite gesture of asking him to leave the cottage. Rocky, the one eyes driver was already sitting in the driver's seat of the Maruti Gypsy. The others had already taken their seats. Yuvraj waited for Ananya to finish packing, and then the two of them exited the cottage together. Nobody bade goodbye to Sanjib Desai and as the engines revved up, they wanted to get out of this place as soon as possible.

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Yuvraj was surprised to see Mitali Roy sitting in the navigator seat this time.

'Don't tell me, you chickened out?' Yuvraj asked Abhinav mockingly, as he leaped into the vehicle after helping Ananya to hop on.

'Hey, you and I don't really know each other that well for us to be doing that,' Abhinav said, and then reminded himself that it was time to grow back into his old friendly self, so he added, 'but maybe we can change that. I'm Abhinav Gandhi —from The Doon academy for boys.'

Yuvraj smiled as he accepted his hand and introduced himself, too, as the engine kicked into life.

Mitali had borrowed Shreya's camera as she sat in the front seat and made good use of it as she shot a video of the exit route from the fence of the estate.

Meanwhile, Shreya had returned to her book, leaving Natasha slightly disgruntled. Shreya only spoke again when they reached Chennai airport. She happened to catch Yuvraj and Ananya professing their love for each other.

‘These were the best three days of all my summers, baby,’ he said as he took her hand.

‘Yeah, mine too,’ she responded.

Shreya wasted no time in alerting Natasha about the new development. She was pretty sure of what she had just seen.

‘Natasha! You need to take a deep breath.’

‘Why, what happened?’

‘Those two,’ she said shifting her gaze towards Yuvraj and Ananya subtly enough for her best friend to realize, ‘finally did it.’

‘Did what?’ Natasha didn’t get it at first.

‘You know, they *did* it? As in, did the romantic nasty?’ Shreya spoke up again, hoping her friend would get it this time.

‘You’re full of shit. Did either of them tell you about it?’ Natasha had a hard time believing what Shreya had just said.

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‘Of course not, why would anyone tell me after they just did it? Oh no wait! You would, right?’ she asked Natasha.

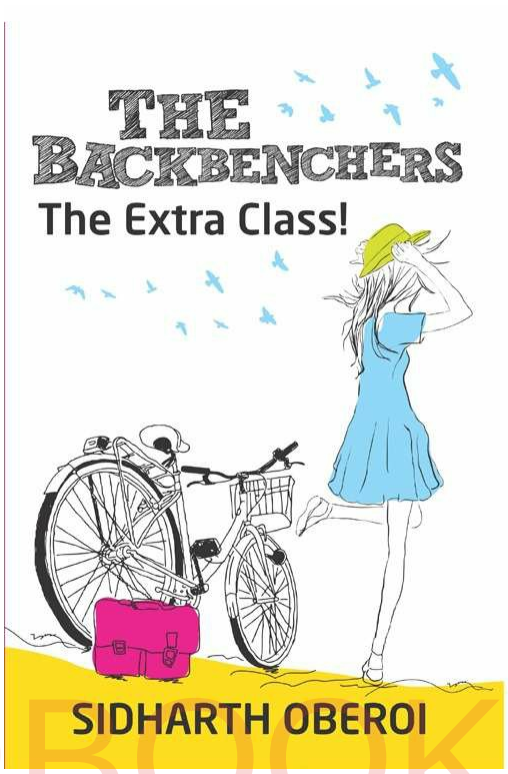
‘Bitch, that’s not the point. If they didn’t tell you, how can you tell that they did it?’

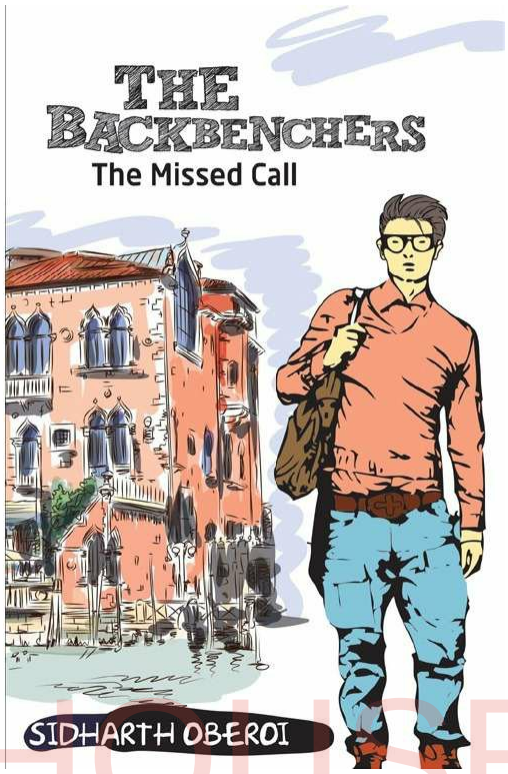
‘I just finished a book by Dickens, Natasha! Of course I can tell.’

‘*Whatever*.’

P.S. Sanjib Desai tried to advertise another workshop, a month after the events of this story. And Natasha, true to her word, poked me on Facebook the minute she saw the advertisement. And well, I did my thing.

The prequels in this bestselling series are:





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The Backbenchers

The Extra Class

@BOOKHOUSE1

Chapter One

“The New Girl”

@BOOKHOUSE1

She looked at the gate. Big and imposing as it was, it gave her a few jitters. This was not the first time she had felt this way ever since she had shifted to Delhi three days back. This morning, she had struggled to get up at six in the morning and catch the metro to Barahkhamba road where her new school was. Her father had asked her if she wanted him to drop her to school and she had refused. Her father was a hardworking man, and she didn't want to be any bother to him.

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Ananya looked all around her. A lot of girls got down from big cars she hadn't seen back in Raipur. Many of them were with guys. People met outside the school gate, screamed at each other and hugged. Ananya looked at them, and felt a little strange. Their skirts had crept up to their mid thighs, their socks were rolled down. None of them had their first buttons of their shirts buttoned up. No one, neither the guys, nor the girls wore the shoes the school had prescribed. *She felt out of place.*

She entered the gate and tried not to look here and there. Everything that she had heard about the school was coming out to be true.

It's a school for rich kids.

You will be a misfit.

Girls are kissing even in ninth standard!

It's twelfth grade and it's not the right time to change schools.

But she couldn't have helped it. None of the Delhi schools would take her in despite her great results in her old school. But at *The Presidency Convent*, her father knew somebody and she could get in. She entered the building and there was a sea of students out there. She had a hard time figuring out where her class was and she was kind of scared to ask anybody for help.

'Excuse me?' she approached a girl passing by and asked, half scared. 'Where is XII C?'

'What?' A girl with chewing gum in her mouth looked at her from top to bottom, paused for a few seconds and walked off. As if Ananya didn't exist. Ananya felt lost and went about finding the class on her own.

XII C.

That was the class that she was supposed to be in for the next one year.

She had a very different idea when she was coming to Delhi. All her friends back there were excited because she was the one going to the big city. To the hip Delhi school. Nice boys. Days of fun! Initially she was just sad because she didn't want to move to a new city, but since her friends back home were so excited, she had started to feel that little glimmer of excitement in her heart too. And yes, she had never seen boys studying in the same school as hers. She had always been in a girls' school. So this was new.

@BOOKHOUSE1

She entered the class and saw all the heterogeneous groups sitting on the top the tables, some of the girls had arms around boys and all of them were making a lot of noise. All eyes turned to her as she entered the classroom.

'Yes?' a girl with braided hair and long nails stood in front of her.

'XII C? New student,' Ananya said.

'Ohh,' she looked at her, her eyes travelling from Ananya's hair to shoes, and walked away.

She felt naked. Even though she was the most dressed up girl in that room, she felt bare. Everybody looked at her. She walked through the rows of benches and looked for an empty seat. Only one bench was empty. *The last bench*.

She put her bag down and looked at her watch. There were still a few

minutes to go. She could hear whispers around the classroom, and she knew they were talking about her. But as the minutes passed, people stopped looking at her and went about their own business.

The first twenty minutes in her new school had been very unsettling, to say the least. Beautiful, pretty girls and short skirts. Guys with hair all over the place and low hanging school trousers in sneakers. She had anticipated that she would notice something like this, but what she didn't know was that this would be the norm here.

Just then, the teacher entered the class. She was both their physics teacher as well as the class teacher. And she was a far cry from the teachers she was used to in her school back home. Ms Juneja was young, thin and she looked only a shade older than a college girl. There was a buzz in the class as she entered the class. The guys gave each other sneaky looks. She was the darling teacher of the school. Ms Juneja was extremely pretty and friendly with the students. A lot of guys in school had a crush on her.

'Aman? Anamika?' she started taking names of the students and marking the attendance.

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Ananya waited for her name. The whole list was read out, not without hiccups. Ms Juneja had to shout a few times to get the class in order.

'Ananya?' Ms Juneja finally said her name.

'Yes, ma'am!' she said.

Ms Juneja had a good look at her before asking, 'New student?'

'Yes, ma'am,' she said and stood up.

'No no, keep sitting,' Ms Juneja stood up. 'So which school are you from?'

'St. Mary's Convent, Raipur,' she said.

There were faces made in the class. None of them had heard of the school.

'Welcome to The Presidency Convent,' she said. 'After this class I will assign you a buddy, someone who would help you with everything that you might need here,' she smiled at Ananya.

‘Thank you Ma’am.’ Ananya said and almost instantly liked her.

Then, she started teaching. Things were a lot different in this school than they were in her last one.

‘Did you all go through the chapter on Thermodynamics?’ Ms Juneja asked sweetly.

‘NO!’ A voice said.

‘Ma’am! Are you kidding me? IPL was on yesterday . . .’ another voice said.

‘. . . we were busy ma’am!’ said yet another voice.

And then there was a lot of noise. Ms Juneja looked on helplessly as the students created a ruckus in class. Ananya realized that this was the routine in this school. Every kid was a brat. And every kid had a powerful dad or mom, or both back at home. No teacher wanted to be on anyone’s bad side. For one, this school was run by the students, and not the teachers.

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All this was new to Ananya. In her last school, students were still getting slapped by teachers.